



BLACK ACE

Many crimes — one criminal

Eleven clues to his identity
are given on the back jacket

GEORGE DILNOT

GEORGE DILNOT

author of the thrilling mystery story 'The Black Ace,' is the first man given unfettered facilities to study every detail of the work of Scotland Yard. An English journalist by profession, he knows London from East to West, and confesses to an absorbing interest in murder and other underhand arts. His 'History of Scotland Yard,' his novel 'The Lazy Detective,' and 'Great Detectives and their Methods' are popular additions to the literature of crime.

Although most of his days are spent in Fleet Street, Mr. Dilnot has played golf with all the great British masters of the game and fought a winning battle with the elements of hook and slice. He is an excellent poker-player and on one occasion was suddenly surprised by his employer, Lord Northcliffe, while matching pennies with Thomas Burke. Admitting that he 'hates writing like poison,' he manages to conceal the fact from his readers, and has plans for several other books.



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The Black Ace

THE BLACK ACE

BY
GEORGE DILNOT

*Author of 'Scotland Yard,' 'The Lazy Detective,'
'The Crook's Game,' etc.*



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TO
H. N. ('BILLY') HUGHES

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The Black Ace

THE BLACK ACE'



CHAPTER I

STELLA SAYS A WORD

THE girl pushed back her chair so that she might the more comfortably adjust one silken leg over the other. She smoothed her skirts demurely, tilted her chin a little, and laughed.

'Funny, ain't it? Me a crook, and you mummy's model boy. Give me a cigarette.'

He passed his case. Her fingers hovered daintily over it as she made her choice, and then with lazy insolence she cast her eyes about the crowded restaurant. A hidden band blared a noisy dance tune and her foot tapped the floor in rhythm. She blew a cloud of smoke and her gaze returned to her companion. 'I've trimmed you,' she said reflectively. 'Trimmed you good and proper. If you lifted your little finger, they'd fetch a John, pronto. No fuss, no worry. Everything quiet and decent. That'd mean a year or two in stir for me. Ugh! Do you know what stir is? If you had the blood of a white rabbit, you'd do it instead of buying me grub at a pound a mouthful.'

The young man hunched his shoulders. 'I don't know that kind of slang. I suppose you mean prison. I had thought of it. Would that get me back my twenty thousand?'

'Not by a jugful it wouldn't.' Her voice had a quality of soft melody that toned the cynical harshness of her words. 'All the same it would be some satisfaction to you.'

'I had considered it,' he admitted. 'That was one of the things I had in mind. I have thought of three alternatives. I might send you to gaol. I might shoot you. I might marry you. I find it difficult to arrive at a conclusion.' He spoke softly as one measuring a business problem in his mind. 'That is why I asked you to dine with me to-night.'

She regarded him with a whimsical twist at the corners of her mouth. 'A gun in one pocket, a marriage licence in the other, and a 'tec at the door. Say, are you leading up to a proposal?'

He leaned his folded arms on the table between them and stared her straight in the face. 'Watch my right hand.' She caught a glimpse of a nickel barrel under the sleeve of his coat and her colour weakened. 'I might shoot you now,' he went on coldly. 'It might be better for you, better for me, if I did.'

Her arms tightened and her hands gripped nervously at the back of her chair. She had nerve, but this unexpected menace had shaken her. 'Don't be

a blasted fool, Dick,' she said, with an attempt to retain her smile. 'You are trying to frighten me. Put that away. Some one might notice.'

'That'll be the finish of us both,' he commented grimly. 'I'm not in the mood for explanations to outsiders. They'll not notice if you sit tight and listen. Smile, girl, smile! God! you've got enough of the actress in you, as I've seen. That's better. Now I suppose that all this while you've thought that I'm a rich mug with more money than sense. I don't blame you. I acted like that. It perhaps doesn't matter to you, but I've pawned my watch to pay for this dinner to-night. You and your gang have cleaned me out. It's tickled you to own up that you're a crook now that you think you've bled me white. But the game isn't over, Stella. I've got to have that twenty thousand back. You've got to help me.'

Her composure had returned to her. She puffed automatically at her cigarette, but her eyes never left his strained face. 'I'm sorry, boy,' she said. 'If you shot me full of holes, it wouldn't help. I couldn't do anything. I'd sooner go take a bone from a hungry tiger than try to get money from Velvet, once he's had his hooks on it. So take it as it comes. Your father will see you right.'

The man laughed harshly. 'Don't harp on that line. Old Simeon Harcroë doesn't know me from Adam. I'm no millionaire's son. I'm just a plain

fool of a stock-broker's clerk, and every penny that you and your gang have had has come from dealings in shares that don't belong to me. That money has to go back.'

Stella Cliffe was not easily startled. Young though she was, those ingenuous blue eyes for all their naïve depths had looked far into many phases of life. She had confronted many crises with poise and philosophy. Yet somehow this revelation threw her out of her stride. She dropped her cigarette and with her hands on her knees bent toward him. 'Do you mean to tell me that you're just a clerk who's been hitting the high spots with the boss's money?' she exclaimed. 'Now I see why you won't hand me over to the police. You're a bigger fool than I thought. Here's me and Velvet and the boys cutting you up for one of the lads. And you want the stuff back. What do you know about that?' She apostrophized the gilded ceiling. 'I'm sorry for you.'

'I don't want your pity.'

'I know,' she agreed. 'You just naturally hate me. Put that gun away, boy. You can't frighten me any longer and it might get us both into trouble.' Her voice was smooth, but, as though under some domination that he could not resist, he reluctantly dropped the weapon back into his pocket. 'That's sensible. Now we can talk. You won't put me in gaol. You can't shoot me. That leaves the third clause of your proposition. Why marry me — me?

I'm clever, but I'm crooked. Where's the idea? How would that help you?'

His fingers rattled a nervous tattoo on the tablecloth. 'You may laugh, but you've been nearer death in this last ten minutes than ever you have in your life before. Make no mistake. I'm dead serious. If I married you, it would be because you would never let me become a disgraced and ruined man. You'd get that money — somehow.'

She gave a little chuckle which she smothered as his sombre frown dwelt upon her. 'You're just as much a crook at heart as I am, Dick. But you worship the great god respectability. You've got a suburban soul. You didn't mind pinching twenty thousand pounds, but you hate to be found out. We'd make a fine couple, you and I. You'd strangle me or I'd poison you in a week.'

'You're not already married?' he demanded.

'No. I'm still in the market. But I don't know that I'm so gone on you, Dick. This caveman stuff — marry or your life — doesn't thrill me. I want to hear something about my bright eyes and my lovely lips. I must be married for myself alone. You didn't think I was romantic, did you? I'll tell you what I will do, though — because, as I've said, I'm sorry for you. I'll give you a thousand. You can get a start with that in the States.'

His face was pale. Up to a few months, Dick Estrehan had trodden the uninspiring paths beaten

by thousands of commonplace young men. His day began with bloaters or brittle bacon, gulped down hurriedly to the accompaniment of weak and tepid tea at his cheap Brixton lodgings. A cigarette — ten for sixpence — a glance at the general news, and a prolonged study of the sporting pages of a newspaper, with particular attention to the racing items. A fight for a tram-car in the Brixton Road. A dull morning at the office, broken by inane stories of near conquests by the junior clerk and by an exchange of racing tips and football gossip with others of the staff. A frugal lunch at a marble-topped table in the crowded smoking-room of a tea-shop — fork in one hand and a domino poised reflectively in the other. Opposite, a pasty-faced colleague who most often won the twopence on the game. An afternoon of insufferable tedium with interminable figures, awaiting the hour of release. Then hey for the bright lights, a seat in the pit of a theatre, a game of billiards at a local saloon, where Dick was received with deference as an authority on Stock Exchange affairs, a game of poker — penny raises — in a friend's bedroom, a dinner in a little Soho restaurant — umpteen courses for two bob — or a rambling itinerary through the West End, where one might swank as a man-about-town, and ogle the girls for the price of a few Scotches.

There were a number of things one might do on six pounds a week if one were careful, and the land-

lady did not mind lending her flatiron so that one might wear gentlemanly trousers. On the other hand, there were a number of things one could not do.

Now it must not be assumed that Dick Estrehan was without ambitions. These might have been diagnosed by the letters he wrote irregularly to a little Hampshire town where his father struggled with the destinies of a tiny chemist's shop. Old Estrehan would now and again proudly read a passage from one of these letters to a favoured intimate. Dick did not lie in so many words, but he conveyed an atmosphere which his parent was quite ready to interpret. The boy was deeply in the confidence of the money kings of London. His own chief, old Hint, of Hint, Hint, Sons and Barter, relied implicitly upon him, and never acted without his advice. Was not Dick his most trusted assistant who beyond doubt would be a partner soon? There was concrete proof, too, of Dick's status in the sums he had been able to remit home of late, and old Estrehan had, for the first time in a precarious career, tucked away a few hundred pounds in the bank. The day could not be far distant when he would retire, become a church warden, and watch his boy soar to meteoric heights in the realms of finance.

And now all this world of sham had crashed about Dick Estrehan's ears. He saw himself starkly — a fool of a tuppenny-ha'p'ny clerk — an object of the

sneering contempt of his friends and associates. Why, even this cynical light girl, criminal herself and confederate of criminals, whom he had patronized while he posed as a man of the world, laughed at him. His skin crept at the thought of gaol, but, curiously enough, it was the hurt to his respectability that aroused his worst apprehensions. He was strung to a point of desperation, willing to snatch at any wild possibility that would keep his shame from becoming known. It was clear, even to his overwrought brain that to abscond under the conditions which the girl offered would not solve his problem. There would be staring headlines in the papers. And, spite of the girl's easy reassurance, it was not likely that he would be able to escape the hue and cry which would surely stretch to the uttermost ends of the earth.

His jaw stiffened. 'No,' he snapped.

She shook her head gently, and, rising, rested her gloved finger-tips on the tablecloth. 'Well, it's a pity. I can't do any more. Pull that gun and get it over.' She waited for an instant, smiling tolerantly down at him while he glowered at her. Then, with a nod of gracious farewell, she turned and carried her slim figure gracefully through the aisles of diners till it melted in the distance of the room.

Dick Estrehan stared unseeingly in the direction she had taken. In a little he too rose, paid his bill, and strode into Piccadilly. He halted, momentarily

irresolute, under the big pillars of the hotel, and a figure muffled in a heavy greatcoat clutched at his sleeve. 'May I have a word with you, Mr. Estrehan?'

The young man froze on his feet. A tumultuous wave of apprehension left his faculties paralyzed. He faced the stranger dumbly, and a low chuckle came from beneath the heavy coat collar. 'Don't be alarmed. I am not a detective.'

'What do you want?' He found it an effort to speak.

'To help you find twenty thousand pounds,' said the other casually. 'We can't talk here. My car is at hand. If you will join me, I will explain.'

Taking assent for granted, he thrust his arm through that of Estrehan and led the way to a great Rolls-Royce drawn to the kerb-side. An alert chauffeur sprang to hold the door wide. Dick took his seat as one mesmerized. His companion followed and the chauffeur adjusted the rugs about them.

'Get along,' said the stranger curtly.

CHAPTER II

BLACK ACES

THE unexpected is part of the expected at Scotland Yard. Nevertheless, as in all well-ordered organizations, extraordinary emergencies are not welcomed. They put a strain upon the machine, and they also throw upon it a limelight which is apt to be disconcerting while working upon a problem, however pleasing it may be when a triumphant conclusion has been reached.

The trouble began when Winter, the veteran chief constable of the Criminal Investigation Department, received in his mail a typewritten envelope which contained nothing but an ace of clubs, apparently taken from an ordinary pack of playing-cards. Winter, who was a practical man with thirty years' experience of the underworld and its ways, tossed it impatiently into a waste-paper basket. Scarcely a day passed but he received some such melodramatic communication among his letters, and he had little time to waste on cranks.

'Some tom-fool who's been reading detective-story tripe,' he commented.

A couple of days later had come the jewel robbery at Dalston. Old Dutchy Ogle had been relieved of ten thousand pounds' worth of gems. He was piti-

fully wrought up about it. Now Old Dutchy might be found ranking in the directories as a wholesale dealer in precious stones, and, in fact, was well known in Hatton Garden. He was also known to the Yard men as a consummate receiver — a fence — through whose podgy fingers had passed the proceeds of many a big haul of stolen jewels. More than once it had been touch and go whether he took his place in the dock, but always there had been that vital gap in the evidence. Precious stones apart from their settings are hard to identify. No honest business man, it is certain, could have denounced this piece of roguery more bitterly; no one could have urged the Criminal Investigation Department more strongly to energetic measures to bring the thieves to justice than did Old Dutchy when he discovered a bare safe — bare, that is, but for a single ace of clubs lying at the bottom of one of the rifled drawers.

When this came to his knowledge, Winter regretted that he had thrown away the black ace that he had received. He regretted it still more when he learned that an ace of clubs had cropped up in still another business. From the Old Jewry the City of London detectives reported that a well-known firm of stock-brokers, Messrs. Hint, Hint, Sons and Barter, were concerned about the strange disappearance of a clerk, one Richard Estrehan, and the return to them by registered post of bonds to the value of twenty thousand pounds belonging to their

clients. On the top of the package was an ace of clubs.

As many newspaper men knew, no man could disclose less while talking with genial earnestness and fluency than Winter. By habit and training he was cautious of mentioning issues until he had thoroughly weighed them. At the moment, apart from the unknown distributor of aces, he was the only person who had knowledge that in some way these cases were linked. Not even Crest, the divisional detective inspector of the J Division, who with his staff was thrusting into certain avenues of the underworld, with a very clear idea that Old Dutchy had been doublecrossed by some of his acquaintances, knew that his chief was aware of facts which might modify that theory. As for the City police, they had merely passed on the singular facts of Estrehan's disappearance as a matter of interest. So far as they knew, his employers did not accuse him of any crime. They had merely circulated his description as that of a missing person as a normal piece of routine.

Still the thing could not now be ignored. Winter twisted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to another as he ran over in his mind the available men who might be able to get to the bottom of the matter. All detectives are not turned out in a mould. They have diverse temperaments and qualifications. One man may succeed by mere dogged tenacity of pur-

pose; another may have close knowledge of certain classes of criminals; a third may have specialist acquaintance with what may be called the mechanical scientific side of crime detection. There is the ruthless domineering type, and the silken-mannered man who can win the friendship even of those whom duty compels him to send to gaol. One man may win because he has imagination, and another because he is utterly destitute of that quality.

Thus it was on careful consideration that Winter sent for Martin Wilde. For Wilde, although he could make the conventional moves — which are pretty much the same in the general course of criminal investigation — could, when put to it, use a vision and an initiative that were beyond the general run. He was a tall, loose-jointed man, something under forty, with lean, clean-shaven face, eyes somewhat deep-set and a thin, mobile mouth that betrayed quick appreciation of the humorous aspects of men and things. Except when business demanded otherwise, he paid a scrupulous attention to dress, and in his spare hours he had a strong leaning toward the theaters. He knew his own value and he was no respecter of persons.

With a tap at the door he strode into Winter's room and tucked his lanky figure into the leather divan chair flanking the chief constable's desk.

'See you're closing up this coining business,' observed Winter. 'When do you think it will be through?'

Wilde contemplated the finger-tips of his left hand. 'A matter of days,' he replied. 'Say a week. We're only waiting to get the three of them at work red-handed.'

'Munt could finish that up, couldn't he?'

'Sure. We've got the place under observation, and are ready to make the arrest.'

'Shove Munt onto it then. I've got something else I want you to look into. Sounds like a bit out of a book. You may be wasting your time.' He briefly recounted the coincidence of the aces.

Wilde listened with impassive face, his chin resting on his cupped hand. 'Funny business, guv'nor,' he commented. 'What do you think of it?'

The other adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and his eyes twinkled. 'I'm too old a bird to think,' he declared. 'I don't make anything out of it. That's your business. The crooks I've met don't advertise — not in this way. You keep your mouth shut and go to it. Not a word outside this room. If this is some one doing a bit of leg-pulling, we don't want any one to know it but our two selves. Let Crest go his own way for the time. If you find that there's something behind it, we can then decide what to do.'

Wilde closed his eyes in concentrated thought. He shook his head slowly when he reopened them. 'Can't see how this can be a joke,' he said. 'Yet, as you say, ordinary crooks don't do this challenge sort

of thing. We shall probably hear of this ace business again. Have you got the card that was found in Dutchy's safe?'

The chief constable passed over a piece of paste-board.

'Thank you, guv'nor, I'll just drop round and have a word with these Hint people.'

Winter, who had the faculty of wiping a subject peremptorily from his mind, turned to other business, and Martin Wilde, whistling softly to himself, made his way to the chief inspector's room to collect his coat and hat. Then he sent for Detective Sergeant Munt, a silent and dogged officer, who received instructions to clear up the coining case with a comprehending nod. It was none of Munt's affair to be curious.

The chief inspector took a bus to the City, and, dropping off at the Bank, made his way to Throgmorton Street, where he found the slightly old-fashioned offices of Hint, Hint, Sons and Barter. The boy to whom he presented his card looked at him with something like awe, and held a whispered consultation with a clerk at one of the high stools, who looked round with sudden interest. Chief detective inspectors still held a glamour even in Throgmorton Street. The clerk slipped from his stool and approached the counter.

'Which Mr. Hint did you wish to see — er — sir?' He was not exactly sure of the degree of defer-

ence with which such a personage as a chief inspector from Scotland Yard should be addressed.

‘One of the partners. I don’t care who.’

‘Is it in regard to Estrehan?’

‘In a way — you might say so.’ Wilde never believed in futile secrecy, and an obvious construction would be put on his visit. Besides, he might find the clerks even more useful than the principals. ‘You are a friend of his?’

‘Yes, sir.’ The clerk was a little flattered by the air of the great man. He was conscious, too, that every eye in the outer office was surreptitiously fastened on him. ‘We had many interests in common. Queer thing for him to do, but he certainly has been rather funny of late. You don’t think that there’s been foul play, do you?’

The detective shook his head. ‘No, my boy, I think that scarcely likely. I suppose he had a number of lady friends — one of the lads, eh?’

A flicker of embarrassment crept into the other’s face, and his voice dropped. ‘Well, of course, you know, sir — that is, we knocked about town a bit together. Nothing out of the way. He liked a bit of fun. It was about a month ago he dropped me. He got in with some swagger people and I suppose I wasn’t high-toned enough. Besides, I haven’t a dinner jacket. I met him one evening coming out of the Gnomes Club with a girl — nice little bit of stuff she was too — and he absolutely cut me dead. Not that

I minded then. I hope I've got tact, and there are times — But a week later I saw him with some men in evening dress in Shaftesbury Avenue, and, believe me, although I went up to him, he stared me through and through as though I was some strange kind of insect. I had it out with him here next day, but he swore I was mistaken — that he had not been near Shaftesbury Avenue — but it was him right enough.'

'Thank you,' said Wilde. 'If you take that card in now, I'll have a word with you later on.'

He found Mr. Reginald Hint, the senior partner, an affable, rosy-cheeked old gentleman, who, beneath an air of breezy nonchalance, tried to conceal what Wilde diagnosed as some slight nervousness.

'Yes, oh, yes. You've come about this fellow Estrehan — a nice boy, Mr. Wilde, though perhaps not perfectly thorough in the performance of his duties. I think he would have sobered down in time and have become a valuable man. We thought it best to report the facts, because he had not been here for some days, and his landlady — he had lodgings at Brixton — called to say that he had also disappeared from there. It seemed an affair for the police, so we just reported it, you see. Nothing to do with us really, but awkward — very awkward, I must say. We're short-handed as it is.'

'There was a question about some bonds,' said Wilde.

‘Ah, yes.’ Hint shifted a paper-weight quite needlessly from one end of his desk to the other. ‘That’s quite all right. They’re all in order.’

Wilde leaned back in his chair, and, thrusting his hands deep into his trousers pockets, regarded the fire from under his shaggy eyebrows. ‘You might be quite candid with me, Mr. Hint,’ he said. ‘These bonds. Were they the identical bonds that you had purchased for your clients, or only similar securities? Had they been in Estrehan’s charge?’

Mr. Hint’s cheeks became more rosy than ever. He blew his nose on a spotless handkerchief. ‘I won’t pretend not to understand what is in your mind,’ he said slowly. ‘I had expected — that is, I had hoped — that there would be no necessity for police action.’ He rose and strode in short staccato paces about the room. ‘To tell you the truth, Estrehan’s duties were more or less mechanical. He should have had no chance to touch those particular securities, much less to dispose of them.’

‘Then he did do so?’

‘I am afraid our enquiries leave no doubt. I’ll not deny that there has been gross laxity in the office somewhere. But the bonds returned to us are exactly similar, though not identical. There will be no loss to our clients.’

‘And if you initiated proceedings against this man, there would have to be disclosure of this — ah — laxity, which would hurt the credit of the firm?’

‘Exactly, Mr. Wilde. There’s really no harm done.’

Wilde withdrew his hands from his pockets. ‘You may ease your mind, Mr. Hint. I have no intention of urging you to prosecute. All I am anxious about is to discover where Estrehan now is. I fancy he can give me information on another matter. Have you the packing in which the bonds reached you?’

The stock-broker gave a subdued breath — it was almost a sigh — of relief as his visitor made his point clear. ‘I am afraid they were thrown away. The address was typewritten and the postmark was the E.C. district. They would scarcely have helped you, though I know how clever you gentlemen are with trifles. But there was a playing-card which probably got into the package by accident. I have it here.’ He pulled wide one of the desk drawers and pushed an ace of clubs into Wilde’s hand. The detective gave it a cursory glance and dropped it between the pages of a small notebook, which he took from an inside pocket.

He had verified a suspicion, had made a first step. It was easy to understand that a clerk who had tampered with securities should be diffident about returning to an office, from which, at the very least, he was certain to be dismissed. But for the black ace the thing would have resolved itself into one of those commonplace everyday incidents with which a lifetime at Scotland Yard had made Wilde familiar.

By the time he had left Hint's offices, he was satisfied that he had learned all that was likely to be gleaned in that quarter. He had questioned every one who had had association with the missing clerk and, in a quaint conglomeration of shorthand and abbreviated longhand, had made notes of the haunts which Estrehan had favoured, and the people with whom he was known to have acquaintance. He decided to draw Brixton.

A garrulous landlady carried the information he had acquired a point or two farther. From a flood of words Wilde gathered that she had frowned on Estrehan's late night habits, and had even ventured a maternal remonstrance, 'because this has always been a respectable house, and I'm a respectable woman.' So far from this having effect, she explained, almost tearfully, the young man had been keeping worse hours than ever, especially since he had taken to going out in a new dress-suit 'just as if he was a proper gent.' She made it clear that sinister foreboding had haunted her ever since her lodger had first shown himself in a dinner jacket. And now goodness knew what had happened. The last time she had seen him he had come home, dressed according to his new habit, and gone out without saying a word. If he had intended to go away, why didn't he take some other things with him? There was his best and his second-best suit still in his wardrobe and his suitcase under the bed.

Wilde got her permission to take a glance at Estrehan's apartment — a rigorously neat bed-sitting-room, cheaply furnished, and with the walls made hideous by stiff photographs of bygone generations of the landlady's relatives framed in plush, and crude specimens of juvenile freehand draughtsmanship displayed in fretwork apparently inspired by delirium tremens.

Wilde had no scruples in searching the place — not such an intensive, prolonged search as he might in other circumstances have made, but a rough scrutiny of things at hand. In the breast-pocket of one of the suits he found a wallet. Taking it by one corner, he shook its contents onto a small bedside table. There were a couple of letters beginning, 'My dear boy,' and signed 'John Estrehan,' breathing pride in a son's achievements and full of petty small-town gossip. There were three bookmakers' slips; a tailor's bill; a few receipts, among which Wilde noted one for a gold watch; a money-lender's circular; a faded photograph of an elderly woman; and a note of seven words addressed to 'R. Narcroe, Esq., The Gnomes Club': 'Will see you to-night. All love. Stella.'

'H'm,' commented the inspector, and, storing the wallet in his pocket, extricated himself from the talkative landlady with a promise to communicate with her later.

'Stella,' whoever she was, presented herself to him

as the most obvious path to follow. So he made his way to the Gnomes Club, which had its home in a luxurious suite of cellars in one of the streets running between Piccadilly and Oxford Street. There the manager received him with almost sycophantic politeness. When one is running a night club a possible fraction to windward of the law, it is well to be polite to police officers. Thus Wilde was afforded instant access to the members' register and to the visitors' book, and his diplomatically framed enquiries were answered promptly. He left whistling and with the complacency of a man who feels that all is well with the world, boarded a bus, and made his way homewards. For, once the name of Stella Cliffe had met his eye as an habituée of the club, he felt that he had in his hands an end of the coil he was seeking to unravel.

It was eleven at night ere he returned. There was the clang of cymbals and the whine of the saxophone in the big main room of the club. The detective stood for a while in the shelter of a curtained recess watching the dancers. Half an hour passed and he glanced impatiently at his watch more than once. At last he saw Stella, buoyant and vivacious, laughing into the face of her tall escort. The two were vividly outlined beneath the strong lights of an archway opposite the spot where he stood. Then the lights flickered and went out. Martin Wilde heard

the low-voiced reassurances of the men, and the subdued tittering of the women above the crash of the band which in some fashion continued to play. He waited till the light should be restored.

Some one switched on a hand-torch, and its beam rested on the man with Stella Cliffe. The two were still beneath the archway, the tips of her fingers resting on his sleeve. Then even that thin ray went out and the blackness was split by a vicious needle of flame. A heavy thudding report mingled with the wild shriek of a woman. The music stopped abruptly.

Wilde flung his way forward, striking a match as he moved. As though at a signal the room was again flooded with light. He saw Stella's companion sprawled on the floor, a crimson blotch slowly spreading on his white shirt-front. Stella was standing rigid as marble with pale, set face, and lips moving mechanically.

'Wouldja believe it?' she was saying as the detective reached her. 'Why, it's you, Mr. Wilde. Wouldja believe it?'

CHAPTER III

THE MURDER OF VELVET

STELLA CLIFFE stood over the dead body of Velvet Grimshaw dry-eyed, incredulous. The ordinary person who, however innocently, however remotely, has come into association with murder always feels as if the solid ground had given way underfoot. Murders are things that one reads about in the newspapers and in books. Stella's reaction was entirely normal.

She had liked Velvet. He was a jolly, companionable rogue. Superficially, at least, he took life as a joke. He needed money, so he used his not inconsiderable wits to get it, and, since an All-Wise Providence had seen to it that there was a sufficient number of victims, he had no difficulty in providing for his wants on a moderately magnificent scale. He could handle a pack of cards as deftly as the most expert conjuror. His knowledge of horse-racing had depth and profundity. Give him ten minutes' start and he could sell a railway concession at the South Pole or a gold mine in New England to the hardest-headed, closest tight-wad of an Aberdeen Jew who ever existed. More than that, he could laugh jovially when the joke was over and demand of his awakened victims as a famous predecessor had done, 'Well, what are you going to do about it?'

Stella had found it well to join the little group that centred about this gentleman, and Velvet had welcomed her. A girl of her calibre could not only lure fat pigeons to destruction, but assist in their plucking. True, Velvet somehow always got the lion's share of the rake-off, but on the whole she did well and he was pleasant to work with. There was no question of love between them. Their intimacy was like that which might exist between a producer and his leading lady.

This girl of the underworld was, if you like, a mercenary, merciless trickster, but she was yet still young enough to feel occasional bursts of compunction. She had found delight in fascinating Dick Estrehan, for she despised him as a rich young fool. She had seen him gulp at the bait thrown down by Velvet — who posed as the 'Honorable Derek Vane' — and his confederates. The thing had been ludicrously simple, and it had been practically all done in one evening in a soft-carpeted, delicately lighted room in the Honorable Derek's flat. There Estrehan had been initiated into the inner mysteries of racing by a great trainer — a rôle taken for the evening by one who was known in certain circles as Sleek Thomas, a graduate of Velvet's own school. He was told how 'jobs' — great racing coups — were carried out, and how easy it was to hide the true form of a horse by allowing it to lose a number of races until its handicap and the betting odds presented op-

portunity for a wholesale raid on the bookmakers. The thing was as simple as falling off a log. A wise man who wanted to make a fortune . . .

So Estrehan had fallen. At the bottom of her heart — though she would scarcely have admitted it even to herself — Stella had felt a sneaking sympathy for him. She had even become a little afraid of her emotions, and had faced the possibility of calfish reproaches by accepting his invitation to a last dinner with the intention of utterly disillusionizing him about herself. The tragedy of that comedy ate deeper into her soul than she would have cared to disclose.

Velvet had given that amused chuckle of his when she told the story. 'So he was a tinkering pen-pusher, after all. Well, he fooled me. Anyway, we've got the money. We should worry.' He cut his laughter off abruptly and his eyes narrowed. 'They'll get on to this bird. I wish he'd taken your thou' and hopped it. They're bound to have him inside, and he'll squeal.'

She gave a shrug of her shoulders. 'No, he won't,' she said.

The man eyed her shrewdly. 'Well, perhaps you know best. If you think you've got him tucked up ——— Anyway, there's nothing to it. He put his money on a horse and the horse lost. We can't be blamed for that. It might happen to any one. How were we to tell that he'd been dipping his fingers in

the till? Let's forget it. Come on. I'll buy you some dinner.'

That had been all. She had tried to wipe the matter from her mind, to forget Estrehan. And now Velvet lay dead and a detective was bending over him.

'He's through,' announced Martin Wilde, straightening himself up. 'Where's the manager? Stand back, you people. I'm a police officer. Here you ——' He seized a gaping waiter by the arm. 'Slip to the door and say that no one's to be allowed to leave the building under any pretext. And then telephone to Vine Street and tell 'em what's happened. Say that Mr. Wilde is here, and that I need half a dozen constables, the divisional surgeon, and two women searchers.'

A moment later he repeated these instructions to the manager, and then his gaze wandered sternly over the crowd of men and women who were now being shepherded back from the little group about the dead man. Almost unconsciously one hand had closed about Stella's wrist. The girl gave a little moan and he turned on her abruptly.

'What do you know about this?' he asked. His tone was low and stern.

'I never thought — I never dreamed that he'd do it,' she faltered. 'If I had known ——'

'Whom do you mean?' His eyes, harsh and commanding, fastened on hers. 'Tell me.'

The girl's face twitched. She made a feeble attempt to release her arm. 'I'm upset, Mr. Wilde. I don't know what I was saying.'

He bent his lips to within an inch of her ear. 'I'll tell you,' he said in a fierce whisper. 'You were saying that Dick Estrehan killed this man.'

'I was not!' she denied tremulously. 'I ——' Her voice trailed off and Stella Cliffe dropped in a dead faint beside the murdered man.

Martin Wilde could not be bothered with attentions to a fainting woman. At his words some of the waiters carried the senseless girl into the manager's room, and Wilde with inward relief saw three men advancing toward him: Vine Street had acted promptly. They were a uniformed inspector, the divisional detective inspector, and the divisional surgeon. While the medical man bent over the body the other three held a short consultation. Then Wilde mounted a chair while the others hurried away.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'Most of you have been witnesses of the crime that has just taken place. A man has been killed and the murderer is still somewhere within this building. I have to ask you to assist my colleagues and myself. Both men and women will be searched before they can be permitted to leave. You will all be questioned and your names and addresses will be taken. I hope that you will follow the instructions that will be given you.'

He dropped to the floor, and a man, wearing across his breast the red ribbon of some foreign order detached himself from the crowd. 'I think you ought to have this,' he said, and by his accent Wilde discerned the educated and travelled American. 'I have just picked it up. I suppose your friend the murderer was anxious to get rid of it.' He held out a small electric torch.

'Thank you,' said the detective. His eyes rested indifferently on the other, yet in that instant he took in a man somewhere about forty, of medium height, but with broad shoulders that gave indication of unusual strength. The brown eyes were steady and inscrutable. Somehow Martin Wilde had a vague impression that he ought to know that clean-cut, square-chinned face with its firm, determined mouth. There was a hiatus in his memory and it irritated him. This man might conceivably be the assassin himself making a bold bid to get rid of a piece of damning evidence. 'I'll be glad,' went on Wilde, 'if you will, as nearly as you can, show me the spot where you found this. It may be of importance, Mr. ——?' He raised his eyebrows in interrogation.

'Thorold. That's my name — Quenton Thorold.'

A flood of recollection swept over Wilde. Quenton Thorold was in a sense an international figure. The attention of Scotland Yard had first been attracted to him during the Great War, when he had

taken audacious personal risks and spent his millions freely in the organization of a sort of unofficial secret service which had been of great value to the Allies. Since the war he had found excitement in an Antarctic expedition headed and financed by himself; he had led what would have been called a filibustering expedition, had it not been successful, into a South American state; and latterly it was understood that he had filled in some spare time with big-game hunting.

'I have heard of you, sir,' said Wilde, extending his hand.

Thorold led him to a spot which he indicated as approximately the place where he had found the torch. The detective with the point of a penknife scratched a cross on the polished floor. 'After I have finished with this gang' — with a sweep of his hand — 'I should like to have a chat with you, sir. Perhaps you will stay around.'

'If I shan't be in the way,' agreed the other.

Wilde's hasty arrangements were for clearing the place as quickly as possible, yet it was certain that a considerable time must be taken. Constables separated the crowd into queues of each sex, and men and women were ushered one by one into different rooms, where they were quickly and efficiently searched. As they emerged, each person was subjected to a rapid questioning by the detectives.

They were a mixed lot. There were a few men and

women of title, many rich young men-about-town, a well-known actress or two — and some not so well-known — a number of business and professional men, a sprinkling of visitors from the suburbs, and a few ladies and gentlemen whose motives for presence at the festivities might be open to doubt. More than half of them had personal reasons for not wishing their names to be linked with a night club, and this did not make the task of the police any easier. But in an hour the job was done. Four persons were detained while other enquiries were made about them, but this was a precaution from which no serious result was anticipated. The rest were turned out into the cold night, where newspaper men, balked of any official information, eagerly seized upon them for 'eye-witness stories.'

News of the affair had filtered out in many directions, and Winter himself had reached the place before the last of the club members had been disposed of. There was no time for explanations and the senior official contented himself for the while with the rôle of spectator. By now there had arrived enough detectives to make a rigorous search of the building simple. The premises were ransacked. If the murderer was still in hiding, he had concealed himself well.

Wilde mopped his brow, across which a dank lock of hair had fallen, and, drawing the chief constable aside, sketchily explained the events of the day and night.

'There's only one way out of this place,' he explained. 'Even the tradesmen's goods have to come in the front entrance. I'll swear that no person has gone out with a pistol. The outer doors, I am assured, were closed immediately on my instructions, and no one had left the building for at least ten minutes before. If the murderer has passed through our hands, what has he done with his gun?'

'Ask me,' said Winter. 'What about seeing this girl?'

'Not much use, I'm afraid,' said the inspector. 'I had almost forgotten about her. I don't think she can help us.'

'But you say she believes that this is the work of Estrehan. That looks likely to me. She may be able to prove a motive.'

'She believes it's that young fellow — yes. That's why I think she can't help us much. I might be tempted to suspect him myself but for one thing.'

He opened and closed a hand so that Winter caught a glimpse of an ace of clubs. 'I started to cross the room on the shot,' he said. 'The lights were out for a matter of seconds. Yet when I reached Grimshaw, this was lying on the lapel of his coat.'

CHAPTER IV

MARTIN WILDE MEETS AN ALLY

WINTER's eyes narrowed. He examined the card which Wilde passed to him, holding it, as the inspector had done, by the edges, and turning it over and over in his hand. He shook his head as he gave it back. 'I don't know that this wipes Estrehan out of the reckoning. It only makes it possible that some one else did it.'

'It's a big world. All sorts of things do happen in it.'

If the chief constable noticed the touch of irony, he gave no sign. Before he could reply a suave voice broke in on them. 'Shall I go home, Mr. Wilde? You said you wanted a word with me, but it's getting late — there's always to-morrow.'

Winter's face flickered a hint of question. Wilde tucked the card into an old envelope — there was just an off-chance of finger-prints — and nodded to the newcomer. 'I beg your pardon, Mr. Thorold. I had forgotten all about you. This is my chief. Mr. Quenton Thorold — Mr. Winter.'

'*The Thorold?*' Winter pushed a big hand forward. 'You're the fellow who robbed the German Secret Service headquarters in Rotterdam during the war and shot a couple of men in getting away? A

fine bit of work. I have been in indirect touch with you before.'

'That's so. I had hoped to meet you in person on this trip. In fact, I have some letters of introduction to you. I am afraid that I've left them at my flat.'

'I don't need introductions to you. Glad to meet you in any circumstances. Settling down in London?'

'I don't know,' answered the American. 'My plans are not settled. It's a dull world, Mr. Winter, and I like movement.'

'So I've heard,' remarked Winter drily. 'Well, you're in quite a little stir to-night. Where does Mr. Thorold come in, Wilde?'

The inspector explained the finding of the electric torch. 'You saw the show from beginning to end,' he said, addressing Thorold. 'There might be something you noticed to which you attached no importance at the moment, some incident, some person, who might link up with the murder.'

'To tell you the truth,' said Thorold, standing on one foot and knocking the ash from his cigarette against the sole of his boot, 'the whole thing took me aback. I hadn't been here half an hour when the trouble started, and I know no one in the place. I can't help you a bit as an eye-witness. The only person against whom there might be any plausible ground of suspicion is myself. I've been in a funk ever since I recollected this. I've been in the habit of

carrying it, and if I'd gone out with the crowd your men might have wanted explanations.'

He drew a small automatic pistol from an inside pocket and tendered it to Wilde, who, for a moment, stared at the weapon blankly. Then without comment he swiftly broke it open and observed that it was fully loaded. He moved nearer to a light and squinted down the barrel.

Thorold gave a whimsical chuckle. 'No, I didn't murder your friend. That pistol hasn't been fired lately. There's a law against concealed weapons in this country, isn't there?'

'The barrel's clean,' admitted Wilde, snapping the weapon together. 'It's a nasty little popgun. You may have your own reasons for carrying it, Mr. Thorold, but if you hadn't been known to us, it might have got you into trouble to-night.'

'Good thing for me that I'm vouched for,' smiled Thorold. He took the pistol from Wilde's hand. 'Mr. Wilde, you were good enough just now to suggest that I might be able to help you. I'm a bored man and if you would let me come into this affair I'd be eternally obliged. I know Scotland Yard doesn't accept help from outsiders as a rule, but maybe you'll put me on a favoured-nation footing.'

The corners of Martin Wilde's mouth deepened a little. He had not intended his remark about assistance to be twisted in this way. He looked over the clean, trim figure of the other with deliberate ap-

praisement. Thorold gravely turned slowly about on his heels as though displaying himself for inspection. Winter's eyes twinkled.

'Want to show us a few new tricks, eh, Mr. Thorold? Scotland Yard a bit old-fashioned?'

Thorold grinned. 'I've got a high regard for Scotland Yard,' he declared. 'It's a solid, efficient British organization, and I'm for it. I'm not a boy. I don't want to teach you anything. I want to learn. Enlist me as a raw recruit if you like. I'll promise to do what I'm told.'

'Wasn't it through you that we managed to get on to those two spies who were working as dockyard hands at Portsmouth during the war?' asked Winter.

The other nodded. 'Guilty. I don't take any credit for it. One of the men working with me thought of a plan for getting into a German yard. I assumed that we didn't have a monopoly of ingenuity and that what could be devised by one side might have been thought of by the other. So with the idea that the Germans might have already tried the scheme in England, I gave your people the tip.'

An unspoken question passed between the two detectives, and Winter nodded. 'I'll be glad of your help,' said Wilde with a slight touch of formality.

'That's settled then. Bold Bill, the boy avenger, will now take the trail. Where do I begin? What do you know about this bird who has been croaked?'

'This is utterly unusual, you know,' said Winter,

who, though he saw some deeper quality beneath the flippancy of the other, had a hint of misgiving at the bottom of his official mind that this American, however efficient he might be on war-time secret service, might not, after all, be exactly the kind of man to march in step with a Scotland Yard murder investigation in law-abiding England. 'You may see and hear things that it would not be wise to repeat. We can rely upon you to keep your mouth shut?'

Thorold's face stiffened to serious attention. 'Absolutely,' he declared. 'Of course I shouldn't dream ——'

'Here's the situation, then,' broke in Martin Wilde. He sketched in rough outline the matters, so far as he knew them, which had preceded the murder. 'You see, here are a series of crimes all isolated from each other and which we should not think of connecting together in the normal way but for this melodramatic touch of the black ace.'

Thorold listened without comment, his eyes narrowed to an intent stare at the blank wall. 'What's your theory?' he asked when the inspector had finished.

Wilde pushed his hands deep in his trousers pockets, puckered his lips, and whistled a snatch from Gilbert and Sullivan. 'A theory,' he said, 'is one of those things invented by writers of fiction and newspaper men to delude innocent readers. Any fool who tries it on a real investigation usually finds

himself on a swift run down a slippery slope to an almighty crash at the bottom. When I see a theory begin to obtrude itself, Mr. Thorold, I kick it swiftly in the belly. It's a snare and a menace to the poor police officer. A theory ignores or overlooks the facts that don't fit in. Take away the ace of clubs and Dick Estrehan probably committed this murder. You don't get a hound forming any theory about the scent that he follows. I'm not a clever man. I've got no imagination, so I look for facts. If all the facts point in one direction, I go for the man or woman that they indicate.'

'Well, where do your facts point to up to now?'

A bland, smiling shake of the head met the question. 'No, you don't, sir. I've told you all that I know. Let's hear what you think.'

'They won't carry you far. First of all, I want to know if these cards are all of the same manufacture?'

'Yes.'

'You've traced them back to the maker?'

'Not yet. But, of course, we shall try that.'

'No finger-prints.'

'Not up to now.'

'All right. Let's put some of that imagination, which you say you lack, to the problem. Has it struck you that those crimes which are linked by the black ace have some features which indicate that they are actuated by some elementary sense of jus-

tice? That man there' — he jerked a thumb over his shoulder — 'Velvet, whatever-his-name-was — was a skunk who is better out of the world. Possibly he's brought off some dirty coups for which he could never be legally touched. So it might have been with your friend the receiver. Mr. Robin Hood — shall we call him that? — determined to make him pay in a way which you police folk were powerless to do. Possibly he applied the money to remedy some other injustice. Why, for instance, shouldn't he have used it in restoring the bonds that disappeared with Estrehan?'

'That's distinctly ingenious, Mr. Thorold,' said Winter. 'But it has some of the defects that Wilde just now pointed out about theories in general. It ignores some things. What about the black ace sent to me? Have I been doing some dirty work and been marked down for destruction? Why should an ace have gone to Estrehan's employers?'

'It all fits in very simply with the kind of person I visualize. Call it the sporting instinct. He throws down a challenge to Scotland Yard. He puts a sort of trademark on the exploits with which he is concerned.'

'A philanthropic madman,' interjected Martin Wilde, pushing back the lock of hair that had again dropped over his eye. 'I hope you're right. A gentleman of that sort ought to be fairly easy to find.'

'You are too polite to laugh, I see,' said Thorold.

'Oh, I won't say that I disagree with you all the way,' retorted the inspector. 'No one in his right senses would plaster these cards all about the place. Whoever it is may be a madman or a crank, and you can never work out what a crazy brain will do. There's only one thing certain, and that is that if he is that kind it's as sure as God made little apples that he will give himself away.' He turned abruptly to Winter. 'This discussion is interesting, sir, but it does not seem to be carrying us much farther. If you'll excuse me, I'll see how this girl Stella is making out. Should you like to come, Mr. Thorold?'

'I should,' said the American.

'I'll leave her to you, then,' said Winter, with a yawn. 'Three's a crowd when you're trying to make a reluctant woman talk. I'm going home. Don't forget to come to see me, Mr. Thorold, and tell me how that theory is going.'

He strode away. Wilde, who was not quite sure that he had done a wise thing in allowing the American to meddle in the case, led the way in a dour silence toward the room where Stella had been taken. He shook off one or two officers who approached him with an impatient 'Later, later,' and thrust open the door.

The manager of the club was seated at his desk, a bottle poised over a glass. He nodded welcome. 'That you, Mr. Wilde? Come in. You're just in

time. You can do with a little something after a night like to-night.'

The detective ignored the invitation and his deep-set eyes ranged the apartment swiftly. 'Where's that girl?' he demanded. 'Where's Stella Cliffe?'

'Why' — the manager put down the bottle abruptly — 'she's gone.'

'Gone — damn!' Wilde, who could contain himself better than most men at a time of big crises, was apt to become irritable at petty vexations. 'Who was looking after her? I said no one was to leave the place without being searched and questioned.'

'I know nothing about it,' declared the manager.

The waiters who had carried the girl into the room were summoned. They protested that they had left Stella in the charge of a woman attendant. This person was found, after some trouble, while Wilde paced the room. The woman, brought to the angry detective, giggled with a kind of nervous hysteria while she answered his questions. All she knew was that she had been asked to take charge of a young lady who had fainted. When the girl recovered, a tall, well-dressed woman, who appeared to be a friend, entered the room. She had left Stella in her care. All that she could remember of the stranger was that she was tall and good-looking. Whether she was dark or fair, how she was dressed, were matters on which she could give no assistance.

Wilde controlled his exasperation and pushed his

enquiries among the men who had guarded the door. From them he gathered that two women had gone out some time after the crowd. They had not been questioned or interfered with because of his instructions.

'My instructions!' blazed the inspector. 'What do you mean?'

One of the men held out a visiting-card. Wilde snatched at the piece of pasteboard. It was one of his own cards and scrawled across the face was: 'These two ladies are known to me. Do not bother them. M. W.'

He slipped a couple of fingers into his waistcoat pocket. His card-case was gone.

His face wrinkled into an appreciative smile that became a gulp of laughter. He drew Thorold a little aside and displayed the visiting-card. 'The joke's certainly on me,' he chuckled. 'Some lad who is obviously a workman has pinched my card-case and used my name to spirit a witness away. The Black Ace, whoever he may be, has certainly got nerve.'

CHAPTER V

A COUNCIL OF WAR

QUENTON THOROLD yawned, aimed a cigarette at the fireplace, and missed. He stretched a foot languidly toward the burning stump that smouldered on the expensive rug just beyond his reach, decided that the effort was too much, and watched the rug burn with complacent indifference.

A cool fresh voice behind him brought him out of his chair with a startled jump. A smiling woman stood framed in the half-open doorway.

'Are you adding arson to your other crimes, Quenton? There is something burning.'

'Only the rug, my dear.' He retrieved the cigarette stump, and slithered his foot on the burnt section of the costly Persian mat. 'It's a small matter. The house is hired, but the furniture is mine. How did you get in, anyway?'

She moved by him and took the chair that he had vacated. 'If you hadn't more millions than an indolent man could waste, you'd be ruined in a week,' she declared. 'Watkins let me in. He told me you were in your study and I offered to find my own way up. I find Nero fiddling while the rug is burning.' She threatened him with a white forefinger. 'You're

rapidly becoming middle-aged, Quenton. Time you were married, my man.'

'Not fiddling,' he protested. 'But I have thought of buying a saxophone. As for the other matter, you reproach me with the usual feminine injustice. Woman, you know — none better — who is to blame. If I have thrown my not inconsiderable personal attractions, not to mention my intellectual attainments and a few odd dollars, at your feet once I have done so twenty times. Once more ——'

Patricia Langton shook her head wearily. 'Don't get sentimental, Quenton. It bores me.'

The man stood with one arm upon the mantelpiece, looking down upon her. 'As you like. We strive to please. Telegraphic address, "Perfect Gentleman, London." You will observe how manfully I repress my not unnatural curiosity. You repel my matrimonial advances with contumely. On what subject, I pray you, may an eligible man's conversation turn when he is visited at the unearthly hour of eleven in the morning by a fair and unexplained guest? Is there a slump in the typewriting trade?'

'I expected you at Balham, yesterday,' she said. 'There are things we have to discuss. Where have you been?'

'Ah! Hist!' He tiptoed with exaggerated caution to the door and bent an ear to the keyhole. 'Do you know, woman,' he said, straightening up, 'that you

are closeted with a sleuth hound — a detective — middle name Sherlock? I warn you to conceal nothing. Anything you say will be used in evidence.'

She stared at him coldly. 'A detective? You've got a nonsensical mood on you this morning. Pull yourself together.'

'It's true. I'm dead serious,' he assured her. 'I have enlisted in the forces of Scotland Yard. I am the ally of the most formidable detective bureau in the world. All day yesterday I was on the trail.'

Her grey eyes glinted mirthfully at his high spirits. 'Is that really so? What is it about? Can I come in?'

Thorold shook his head reprovingly. 'You forget we're at peace, Pat. For counter-espionage work I'll grant that you had no superiors. You could twist the most astute German round your little finger. But those days are done. Respectable ladies who run flourishing typewriting establishments can't go round hunting murderers. I'm almost sure that my friend Wilde wouldn't approve. By the way, I'm expecting him at any moment. I'll put in a word on your behalf, but I hae me doots.'

'Who is Wilde?'

'One of those things that have hitherto attracted me to you has been a certain masculine balance which you are in danger of losing. Don't jump at me so. Mr. Martin Wilde, with whom I have the honour to be associated, is an eminent detective in-

spector of penetration and insight. You get proof of that straight away because he has accepted my help. Cutting it all short, dear child, I was idling my time away at a night club a couple of nights away when a gentleman, by name Velvet Grimshaw, got what I imagine was overdue to him. You may have seen some account of it in the newspapers. Wilde was Johnny-on-the-spot and he set the wheels going round. What the newspapers did not say, and what I disclose to you in the deepest confidence, is that on this bird there was found an ace of clubs which had apparently been placed on the body by the person who killed him. The funny thing was that Wilde was there to follow up some other cases with which the ace of clubs had been associated.'

'And you jumped in as a volunteer detective?'

'If that is a sneer, it misses fire. Mr. Wilde and Mr. Winter, who I understand is the big noise in the London detective world, took me at face value. I presented them with some ideas, and on the other hand Mr. Wilde showed me a few things. If the Black Ace hadn't put in some slick work out of hand, he'd have been nabbed.'

'You have been at it with your eminent inspector for more than thirty-six hours. I have not heard that the Black Ace has been arrested.'

Thorold lifted his shoulders with the air of a man who had been worsted, but there was an enigmatic smile on his face as at some undisclosed jest. 'This,

I think, should be Mr. Wilde,' he said, as the faint sound of a bell reached the room. 'If you will allow me, I will have a word with him in private before I introduce you. Your coming may need some small explanation.'

She nodded assent, and, as he passed out, rose and surveyed herself in the mirror over the fireplace. Patricia Langton was a beautiful woman and she knew it. There was no one of her sex who was more free from vanity, but her keen mind had a full appreciation of good looks as an asset. So she considered her reflection critically, and, after a pat here and a touch there, thoughtfully resumed her seat.

Time was when Patricia Langton had been a pure idealist. That possibly came of her Irish blood, although she had been born in England. She still retained ideals, but they had been tempered by sterner experiences than fall to the lot of most women. The cataclysm of the World War had engulfed her father's business, and he himself had fallen at Neuve Chapelle. Her mother had died years before. The girl herself, though not yet out of her teens, had gone to France as a V.A.D. nurse. There it was that she had first met Quenton Thorold, and they had recognized each other as kindred spirits with a taste for perilous adventure. He had recruited her into that little band which he had organized at his own cost under the, at first, cold tolerance, and later, the benevolent ap-

proval of the Allied Governments to fight the German spy system, and on occasion to do a little spying on their own account. In this matter Patricia Langton's nerve and resource had proved invaluable. She had lent herself to many things which a brave man might have shirked without discredit.

This auburn-haired, grey-eyed girl, with her vivacity and charm, had a taste for independence. Even Thorold, himself, with whom she stood on a degree of intimacy unusual between opposite sexes, had failed in his persistent attempts to put their friendship on a different footing.

'I like you too well to marry you,' she had told him, and nothing could shake her resolution.

She had even refused to accept his help when the war finished. With nothing but her faith in herself and a few pounds in her pocket, she had set herself to make a living. Thus she had built up a flourishing typewriting bureau which now needed the services of a dozen assistants. So she had reached comparative independence. Her association with Thorold had been renewed on his rare visits to London, and they had ever kept up a frank correspondence.

Martin Wilde, entering the room in the wake of Thorold, saw a pair of ingenuous grey eyes which gravely took stock of him at the introduction. He met her gaze impassively.

'Well, what do you think of me?' he asked.

'You answer to the specifications laid down by

Mr. Thorold,' she returned. 'More to the point is what you think of me.'

'I am not a ladies' man,' he said. 'Mr. Thorold's specifications did not do you justice. I pictured some one quite different.'

'An elderly lady with a firm jaw and a touch of vinegar, I suppose,' she laughed.

He bowed. 'I am agreeably disappointed.'

'That will finish the compliments,' she said with an abrupt change of manner. 'I am concerned to know the result of your conference. Can you use me?'

The detective shook his head. 'Officially, no,' he said. 'Unofficially, I shall be glad to have you interested. I don't want any misunderstanding. Neither you nor Mr. Thorold will have any authority. You will act only upon my instructions. Both of you are much more clever people than I am, but if you are going to work with me I am top dog. I tell you that plainly.'

'That's reasonable,' she assented. 'I accept.'

"The time has come, the walrus said,'" quoted Thorold. 'Shall we drink confusion to the Black Ace, and success to the triple alliance? What would you like, Pat? How about it, Wilde?'

Patricia Langton refused, but the detective, although he professed some diffidence at the early hour, accepted a whiskey-and-soda, 'under protest,' as he said, and, as he sipped it, permitted himself to

be drawn by Patricia on the general aspects of the investigation.

‘When you get a crime, or a series of crimes, marked by peculiar features,’ he said, ‘it is usually more susceptible of solution than a colourless and quite simple offense. It is sometimes more difficult to find out a tramp who has casually lifted something through an open window than a murderer who has taken the most excessive precautions against discovery. Now in this case you have a daring and resourceful person concerned in three crimes of a widely different character, and going to some trouble to ensure that they are all credited to him. Why? The average criminal — the kind we at Scotland Yard have to deal with day by day — runs on more fixed lines than that. The big crook keeps strictly to business. I have never yet met a professional crook whose vanity ran to such lengths that he willingly advertised himself at the risk of conviction, although a mad murderer — Neill Cream — once did something similar. We have lines of enquiry running in at least three directions. If we get the man who stole the jewels from Old Dutchy Ogle, we shall be close to the murderer of Velvet Grimshaw.

‘Now the fellow who pinched those stones knew more about the crooked game than any amateur. We thought that we’d got every man capable of a job like that on our list at the Yard. You may

have heard of the Crime Index — the Modus Operandi System? Yet it is difficult to believe that a professional would act in that way. The murder at the Gnomes Club took place in the presence of hundreds of people, but no one saw the assassin. As you observed, Mr. Thorold, I took instant precautions, yet he got away. He — or she — even picked my pocket and spirited away a witness. Here is proof that we are dealing with a person of more than ordinary powers of brain and action. This in one respect simplifies the problem. We know now that the Black Ace is a man who can calculate and take cool and desperate risks. That limits our search.'

'A man? Why not a woman?' said Patricia Langton.

'Thank you. It is possible. It was a woman who spirited Stella Cliffe away. But there was a masculine touch to the jewel robbery, and I think that we shall find in the end that there are two persons concerned, no doubt a man and a woman. That would fit in. One of these at least is a crank with a belief in a mission. Such a person may be both cunning and unscrupulous as the records of notorious anarchists have shown. Either the man or the woman may be the dominant spirit — I cannot say. We are looking, therefore, for a man and a woman of a certain mentality, one of whom was recently in the United States and may be an American.'

'Here's a piece of Sherlock,' observed Thorold. 'Will you elucidate?'

'There's no magic about it. One of the first suggestions you made was that we should push enquiries among playing-card manufacturers. The result of that is that we are satisfied that those cards which have been distributed were not made in this country, but in the United States. We have sent a sample to New York, but I don't think it likely that it will lead to anything.'

'I suppose it has occurred to you,' said Thorold, 'that, if the Black Ace is the kind of person you think, he is likely to break out in a fresh spot at any minute.'

'You have put your finger on a point. I am rather expecting that, but I do not rely on it. Every open move these people now make will help us. However it goes' — he caught hold of the lapels of his coat, and moved fiercely in a sort of quarter-deck stride up and down the room — 'I'll clear it up if it takes a year or ten years.'

'I have had men checking up on every person known to have been at the Gnomes Club on the night of the murder. The only one who escaped interrogation was the lady with my card, but the possibility can't be overlooked that her confederate got out with the ruck. Some queer lads frequent these places and there are a number of whom we are still not sure. We, of course, tried to pick up a car or a cab that carried away Stella and her companion, but there was such a crowd of these things that that

line is almost hopeless unless we hit a streak of luck. We are advertising for a cabman who drove two ladies away because we can't afford to overlook any bet. Our main hope is to get hold of Stella Cliffe or Dick Estrehan and see what they have to say. Our men have been raking London for their intimates and acquaintances ever since the murder. We are also looking up all of Velvet Grimshaw's gang and we may or may not get a hint in that direction. The murderer is, or has been, in touch with all these people. It is through them that our main chance of finding him depends. Here is where each of you may be of use. I will give you a list of persons we have seen in regard to Estrehan and the girl. You, Mr. Thorold, will look after Estrehan. I shall ask you, Miss Langton, to try to find Stella Cliffe. I will see that you have photographs. Each of you will to some extent be covering ground that has already been searched, but you may pick up something we have overlooked. You can use your own methods so long as you do nothing illegal, and you must not in any way compromise the Yard. You will be acting entirely unofficially.'

'Over the top with the best of luck,' said Thorold, lighting a cigarette. 'What do you say, Pat?'

Her fingers drummed on her knee, and her eyes searched Martin Wilde's face. 'I'll find Stella Cliffe within three days,' she said with a placid certainty that robbed her words of any appearance of braggadocio.

The detective regarded her gravely. 'I hope so,' he said dryly.

There was a discreet knock at the door and a manservant entered with a number of letters. Thorold rapidly ran through them. 'Hello,' he said. 'Here's one for each of you. Now how could any one know that either of you would be visiting my flat.'

Wilde stretched out a big hand. 'I will make one guess what it is,' he said grimly, as he scrutinized the typewritten address. He thrust a finger into the envelope and tore it open. An ace of clubs dropped to the floor. Patricia held out a similar card from her letter, and Thorold, snatching an envelope from the remaining batch, displayed a third ace.

'Now how in hell could he guess that we ——' His voice trailed off into nothingness.

'Ask me,' said Martin Wilde, still staring at his card. Then he shook himself like a big Newfoundland dog. 'I'll take these cards — and the envelopes. Is there anywhere I can write a note?'

CHAPTER VI

A RECRUIT FOR THE BLACK ACE

WHEN, in the shadow of the restaurant where he had left Stella Cliffe, Dick Estrehan stepped into the big car with the stranger, he was in a condition of mind which for a time made coherent impressions difficult. He could get no clear estimate of the other. His instinctive glance had shown him nothing more than a heavy storm collar and a hat tilted low on the forehead. All that he could gather of the stranger's personality was from his voice and his height.

The light had not been switched on in the interior of the car, and curtains drawn across the windows obscured any illumination from the street lamps. Dick, as he became more master of himself, turned in his seat to attempt some better view of the man seated by him. All that he could make out was a blur in the semi-darkness.

'Wondering who I am?' said the blur. 'That's pardonable curiosity, but don't carry it too far. I don't like inquisitive people. You may call me Mr. Nemo of Nowhere, if you like. That's as good as any other name.'

There was an incisive, commanding quality in the voice. Estrehan, still under the reaction of the interview with Stella, was a mentally exhausted man, and

it may have been that so he felt the domination of the stranger the more. He sank back in his corner.

'I should like an explanation,' he said weakly. 'How much do you know about me? Why should you ——'

'Help to keep a defaulting clerk out of prison,' broke in the other. 'It's a whim of mine. I believe that I can make use of you — if you are sensible. As for what I know of you, shall I tell you why you dined with Stella Cliffe to-night with a revolver in your pocket? Shall I tell you how Velvet Grimshaw worked that old racing stunt on you? Shall I tell you how you contrived to hoodwink your firm to the tune of twenty thousand pounds? Shall I tell you that you were trying to nerve yourself to suicide, or perhaps to murder and suicide, when I spoke to you on the steps of the hotel?'

Dick Estrehan sprang to his feet. He had passed through much that evening and his nerves were frayed to snapping point. 'You know too damned much!' he snarled. 'This is a trick! You are trying to entrap me into a confession. I ——'

His wrist was gripped and twisted by a strong sinewy hand, and he gave a little whine of pain as his pistol dropped to the floor.

'Sit down, you fool,' commanded the stranger. 'Haven't I told you I am not a detective? Why, you neurotic young idiot, I don't want to hurt you.'

'You've broken my wrist,' moaned Dick tearfully.

‘Nonsense. Here, drink this. You’ll be all right in a minute.’

There was a ripple of liquid, and the metal cup of a flask was held to the clerk’s lips. He gulped at the fiery stuff and tried dizzily to lift a hand to push it away. He felt himself falling, falling, from a tremendous height, and then there came utter oblivion.

He awoke abruptly with the daylight streaming about him, and stared at his surroundings in stark astonishment. He had been lying on a window couch in a room furnished as a luxurious but efficient private office. The dome of Saint Paul’s in the distance gave him some notion of his whereabouts. At a desk in the middle of the room a man was bending over a typewriter. It came as a shock to Dick in the prosaic atmosphere to observe that the upper part of the other’s face was hidden by a small crêpe mask.

At his first movement the masked man had lifted his head and got to his feet. ‘Feeling all right now?’ he asked heartily. ‘A bit wambly in the inside, I expect. Would you like some breakfast?’ As if taking assent for granted, he moved to a cupboard and produced a tray, which he set down in front of Estrehan. Unscrewing a vacuum flask, he poured out a cup of steaming coffee. ‘Eat and drink, and then we’ll get down to business.’

With a matter-of-fact air he resumed his place before the typewriter. Estrehan sipped at his coffee, for the back of his throat was parched, and made a

pretence of attacking the food. But he could not eat. He pushed the tray impatiently away.

‘What does all this mean?’ he demanded. ‘You drugged me.’

‘Of course,’ agreed the figure at the table. He pushed the typewriter away, and leaned forward with elbows on the table, keen eyes glinting through the slits of the mask. ‘I did so, my son. You were jumpy. I wanted you to listen to me with a cool head. Now mark what I am going to say. You know what would have happened to you if I hadn’t intervened?’

Dick Estrehan lifted his hands in a helpless gesture.

‘I see you do. You’d have been as good as a dead man at this minute — drowned, or shot, or maybe hanged. If I turned you out of this place now, it would amount to the same thing — unless you preferred to go to gaol — don’t forget that knowing what I know I can always put you there. Now I’m the one man in the world who is willing to help you. I want to buy a year of your life. For that I’ll pay twenty thousand pounds to save your skin. So far as money goes, I’ll see that you never want anything in reason afterwards. But’ — he pushed a clenched fist out threateningly — ‘you’ll have to earn it. You will belong to me — life and reputation. If you let me down, I’ll toss you to the wolves with no more compunction than I’d crush a fly.’

With lowered head and fingers fumbling together in a nervous spasm, Dick Estrehan listened. 'No need to threaten,' he muttered. 'If you mean what you say, I'm your man for anything short of murder.'

'Depends what you call murder,' said Nemo, with a cold suavity which made his hearer's skin prickly. 'There are men who would be better dead, although the world would call their removal murder. Have you ever considered, Estrehan, what a number of skunks there are about — people who get away with dirty tricks whom the law is powerless or too incompetent to touch? There's Velvet Grimshaw, for example. Here's a young fool like yourself — forgive me if I am personal — ruined for life, driven into the ranks of crime. You are not the first who has suffered through him. A properly civilized community would shut such a man up like a lunatic or a wild beast. Would it not be for the good of every one if he were put out of the way? A procurer of women is sent to prison. A manufacturer of criminals may go on, if he is cunning enough, till he dies of old age in a suburban villa. There are crooks — burglars, hold-up men, even ordinary sneak thieves — who do take chances. The parasites of the underworld take no chances. They escape legal punishment. They shelter behind others. Is that fair? Is that logical?

'I am talking like this,' went on Nemo, 'because I want you to understand a point of view. In primitive communities when the law fails, honest men take the

administration of justice into their own hands. In the great so-called civilized countries of the world, men and women are made amenable for the more obvious crimes, but the subtle, ruthless crook slips through the net. A time will come when the meshes of the net will be finer. Until that time comes, there are those of us who have decided that certain men shall pay for their actions when there is a probability that they may succeed in evading the direct agencies of the law. We are, if you like, a vigilance committee to deter and to punish. Men like Grimshaw' — his jaw stiffened pugnaciously — 'have to be dealt with as rats that carry a plague. There are others to whom a lesser punishment is due. We shall see that it comes to them. In a narrow and technical sense we ourselves are criminals, but we are doing a work that in the future will be recognized as necessary, and essential to the welfare of the world. We know the risks that we run, but we are the pioneers of an ideal.'

There was the ring of the fanatic in his voice as he concluded. Estrehan was impressionable, and in his present frame of mind he was not inclined to seek for fallacies in the other's reasoning. The memory of the way in which he had been duped was still hot in his mind. He hesitated only as a man might hesitate before a desperate but attractive gamble.

'What do you want me to do?' he asked. 'Why should you select me?'

Nemo shrugged carelessly. 'You happened to be the first to hand. We have Velvet early on our list, and, as he has been devoting some attention to you, you naturally came under our eye. I believe you have learned your lesson. You are young, desperate, and have some intelligence. I believe something can be made of you. Nor will I conceal that we need recruits who are tied to us. You dare not betray — even if you would. But you join us freely or not at all. You have your choice. The door is open.'

Estrehan half rose. The other watched with a whimsical, half-mocking smile, and he sank back on the couch. Outside that door was certain disgrace. If he fell in with the wishes of the unknown, there was at least a hope. Yet he still hesitated.

'I believe you are the devil,' he burst out. 'I don't know what to do. You said — you hinted — I couldn't kill a man in cold blood.'

The smile of the other broadened into an amused chuckle. 'That's where the shoe pinches, is it? Don't worry. You won't be asked to. That part of the programme will be for others — when it comes.'

'Then there's another thing,' said Dick, his eyes avoiding the gaze of Nemo. 'There's a girl — Miss Cliffe. I can't — I won't do anything against her.'

'H'm. That's the little she-devil who helped to twist you. So she's not opened your eyes. Do you still want to marry her?'

The younger man muttered something unintelligible.

'No accounting for tastes,' said Nemo. 'All right, son. You can rest easy. She shall marry you.' He spoke with a nonchalant certainty. 'That fixes that. Now you are one of us. Can you work a typewriter? Come and sit down here and let me have a list of those securities you have hypothecated. I'll see that they go back to the right place.'

He paced to and fro about the room and as Estrehan finished the list put it in his pocket without looking at it. 'Now about yourself. You will have to lie low for a while, and you can't do better than stay where you are. Not that any one is likely to recognize you. I have taken some liberties with you while you slept. There is a glass over there. Take a look at yourself.'

Estrehan obeyed and gave a gasp of horror. Some stain had been applied to his face, and the reflection he saw was that of a mulatto.

'You will find a bottle and some cotton wool in the cupboard,' went on Nemo. 'You can finish off your hands and arms with that. Better do your face over every morning. I'm not sure how the stuff wears. Don't look so worried, boy. It's all for your good.'

Dick rubbed his cheek with a tentative forefinger.

'I don't like it. Why is disguise necessary?' he asked.

'There's more than one reason,' retorted the

masked man. 'I can hush up the affair of the bonds, but I shan't be able to stop comment on your disappearance. Suppose some one dropped in here and recognized Dick Estrehan? Again it may be necessary for you to drop out of here and leave no trace. Once you've cleaned yourself, no one would connect a dusky clerk with a white man. The average crook makes the mistake of disguising himself after his crime. An intelligent man disguises himself for his operations and escapes in his own proper person. No one expects disguise in the first place and every one expects it in the second.

'I don't anticipate,' he went on, 'that you will be much troubled with callers, although you must be prepared for them. This is an inner room, a private office. You can eat and sleep here for a couple of days — I'll see that you are provisioned — and after that it will be safe for you to take a stroll now and again. Out here' — he opened the door and disclosed a big outer room with a counter dividing it in two — 'is the general office of Messrs. Maule, James and Company, East India merchants. I shall find some clerical work for you to do, and in your spare time you may exercise your ingenuity in concocting letters to and from the Indian branch of the firm in Calcutta. Is that clear?'

'I have to act just as if this was a genuine business?'

'Precisely. Here is a private address book. Oppo-

site each name is a code word — 'Jute,' 'Cargo,' 'Coffee,' and so on. All letters that are addressed to the firm you will open. The fourth word in each letter will be one of these. You will readdress envelopes and send them on. Most people who call in person will ask for Mr. James. You will reply that Mr. James is not expected for some hours. Some of the callers will then ask you to give him a card on his return. If any card has sketched on it an ace of clubs it will indicate that the man or woman who presents it has authority, and you will obey any instructions he or she may give you. On occasion you will get telephone messages which you will write down and send on.'

'I think I understand,' said Estrehan doubtfully.

'One thing more. You must ask no questions. Keep your mouth shut and your fortune is made. By the way, your own name is Thompson. You are a Eurasian.'

'Very good, sir.'

'That's all, then. I should like you to go outside for a moment.'

Estrehan moved into the outer office. The door shut behind him and he heard a bolt click in its socket. In five minutes it was shot back. There emerged a limping, stoop-shouldered, middle-aged man with a slight moustache, and wearing tinted glasses.

'Good-day, Thompson,' he said.

'Good-day, sir,' said Dick Estrehan.

CHAPTER VII

MR. MARKWELL GETS A SURPRISE

MR. ISAAC MARKWELL smiled greasily on his visitor, and placed a chair where the light would fall on her face. The head of the Cosmopolitan Detective Syndicate was, as might be expected, a man of experience. With his black moustache, piercing eyes, and slim white hands he looked rather like a conjuror. Time was when Mr. Markwell had flourished a shrewd lawyer. The big criminals of an age had elected him their 'mouthpiece,' and, though some of his clients had been hanged, there were others who had to thank his ingenuity for the chance to renew their war on society.

The legal forces of the Crown dreaded and suspected Mr. Markwell. His witnesses might frequently be perjurers — and this was the most obvious of his fertile expedients — but they were well-drilled and not to be shaken. No one could prove that Markwell had concocted their lies. And the Treasury, the Home Office, the Public Prosecutor, and Scotland Yard knew that, although the most flagrantly guilty of crooks might slip from under the sword of justice at the Old Bailey, only the most clever of them got away with the proceeds of their crimes. Once in Markwell's hands they were skinned

thoroughly and efficiently. 'Sailor Bill,' for instance, was known to have had three thousand pounds when he was arrested for stealing the Downshire jewels. Yet, when Markwell had got him acquitted, within a week he had been forced to borrow small sums to pay the rent of a tiny back room in Kennington.

The authorities waited patiently for Markwell to make a false step. A hundred alert eyes were on his every action. He knew they were waiting, and, contemptuously self-confident, did the very thing that they expected. He was tempted to handle a tricky insurance swindle. Then a pounce had been made and, for once, Markwell found his resource fail him. The biggest guns of the Public Prosecutor were trained on him, and he had gone down — fighting — for seven years.

Naturally when he came out his legal career was done. There remained the resource of the private enquiry agency, where a man of his knowledge and ability, who was not afraid of dirty fingers, might help himself to good pickings while keeping to the lee of the law. So the Cosmopolitan Detective Syndicate came into being.

Markwell summed up his visitor carefully. She was simply dressed, but even his masculine eye could discern that her clothes had cost money. Her figure was that of a girl, but her troubled face was that of a middle-aged woman. She might have been either forty or fifty.

‘You sent in no name,’ he began silkily. ‘Of course in our business every one does not care to let the clerks know their identity. I am the head of the firm. You can rely upon my discretion.’

The woman fidgeted with her handbag. ‘I do not think that names are necessary,’ she said firmly. ‘This will, I think, serve as a sufficient introduction.’ She leaned across the desk and put ten five-pound notes in front of him.

Markwell picked up the notes with an impassive face. ‘I understand,’ he said quietly. ‘This is no doubt a retainer. What do you wish me to do?’

‘It is a matter of the greatest delicacy on which I can scarcely consult my own lawyers,’ she explained. ‘A good many years ago I was inveigled into a marriage with a man who afterwards deserted me. I had news of his death in Canada and I married again. Now a person has turned up who asserts that he has proof that my husband was alive at the time of my second marriage. He has made heavy demands upon me and to-night we have an appointment at my house. There is a question of inheritance. I should like you to be present.’

He scented possibilities. ‘Ah. An inheritance. Perhaps a title?’ he insinuated quietly.

She passed by the question as though she had not heard, and cast a glance at her wrist-watch. ‘I must know the truth,’ she said. ‘You shall see this man and he must be silenced. It is now half-past five. He is due at my house in half an hour.’

‘I will do what I can. It would be better if you trusted me fully. Without knowing the full facts, I may be hampered. Where is your house?’

‘Number 439, Berkeley Square.’

‘Thank you. I will give a few instructions and be ready to go with you in five minutes.’

He was back well within the time with his hat and coat on. A hasty recourse to a directory and to ‘Who’s Who’ had shown him that 439 Berkeley Square was the town house of the Viscountess Elsford. The present peer, her son, was sixteen years old and still at Eton. Here were all the signs of an aristocratic and profitable skeleton.

A neat sedan was waiting at the door and the woman he assumed to be the Viscountess motioned him to a seat by her side. She answered his attempts at conversation in monosyllables. At Berkeley Square the car drove away before they had reached the top of the steps heading to the pillared doorway. The door itself was held open by a liveried servant. Markwell was shown into a room at the rear of the house. Although dusk had scarcely begun to fall, the curtains were drawn and the place was brilliantly lighted. He hummed a snatch of a song as he waited for the Viscountess to return to him. A picture, which he took to be a Constable, engrossed his attention.

Although he had heard no sound, he became uneasily aware that he was not alone in the room and

wheeled swiftly. A man was standing by a recess regarding him silently from beneath heavy black brows. 'Good-evening, Mr. Markwell,' he said evenly.

'Good-evening,' returned the other.

'I had been hoping to have the pleasure of your personal acquaintance for some time. Now I have managed it. The last occasion on which I saw you was a good many years since. Don't strain your memory. You were a little too preoccupied to notice me. One of His Majesty's judges was addressing a few biting remarks to you. It was seven years, wasn't it?'

Markwell eyed him steadily with unmoved countenance. He showed his white teeth in an even smile. 'I take it that I am in the presence of the gentleman who has been doing a little blackmailing?' he said.

The black-browed man laughed. 'My dear sir, why be so crude? We belong to the same fraternity, you know. How much real private enquiry work do you do in a year? Do you know why Sir Pennis Edor shot himself in Paris last year? Why was the engagement of young Lantil broken off? What led to old Tibbald going through the bankruptcy court? Why is Lady Farthing keeping to her country house? In the words of an eminent statesman, I pause for a reply.'

The heavy wrinkles showed on the enquiry agent's

forehead. 'What are you trying to do?' he asked. 'Scare me off?'

'Oh, the little jackals like myself run away from the carcass when the wolf wants to feast. I simply mention these things. How much do you think that you have in the bank?'

Markwell twisted his moustache and put by the question with a snort of disdain.

'Oh, well, it doesn't matter. You carry a cheque-book. Sit down and write a cheque for fifteen thousand pounds. Make it payable to the Middlesex Hospital.'

Markwell broke into a gust of scornful laughter. 'What is all this comedy about?' he demanded.

'I am glad that you see the joke. Do you see anything funny about this?' He picked a heavy hunting-whip from a corner and ran the lash through his fingers. 'I am a big, strong, fairly young man. You are getting on and you are out of condition. The windows are shuttered and there is no one in the house but my assistant who opened the door, and the lady whose little fairy tale brought you here. Do you appreciate the position?'

The enquiry agent folded his arms calmly. 'You can't frighten me,' he asserted.

'We shall see,' said the other, a grim note beneath the lightness of his voice. He advanced a step and flicked the lash lightly in Markwell's face. 'We debated whether we should kill you, but we

thought this was better. Make up your mind — quick.'

'Damn you — no!' Markwell sprang furiously forward with clenched fists.

With the agility of a boxer the other evaded the clumsy lunge. The whip descended with a vicious snick, and a reddened wheal showed on the face of the enquiry agent. Half-blinded, he lunged again. A table crashed to the floor and he fell entangled with it. A ceaseless rain of stinging blows continued to fall as he picked himself up and with blood streaming down his face tried once more to get to grips with his antagonist. Half-sobbing with inarticulate curses, he struck futilely at the empty air. The cutting lash twined about his legs, his shoulders, his face. The black-browed man, light-toed, alert as a dancer, swung the whip with methodical, merciless precision. Once Markwell contrived to grasp the cruel thong, but it was pulled roughly from between his fingers. He fell again, and this time he did not rise. He cowered on the floor with his hands clasped tightly about his head. There was blood on the carpet and on the furniture. But not till his coat had been ripped to ribbons was the other satisfied. He flung the whip from him and addressed the sobbing, shuddering heap on the carpet.

'Now, will you sign?'

Painfully, slowly, and quivering in every limb, Markwell got to his feet. His face was a ghastly

crimson and white, and as he wiped it with a handkerchief he left a grotesque smear. He dragged out a cheque-book and, tottering to a chair, began to write, with a shaking hand.

The other stood by him and took the cheque as it was finished. Carrying it nearer to the light, he compared it closely with another document. He shook his head and stooped with a significance that was not lost on Markwell to regain the whip. He tossed the cheque back scornfully.

‘Still trying to cheat? Haven’t you had enough?’

Markwell flinched back to the wall. ‘I — I — not again,’ he cried in sudden terror.

‘Your ordinary signature next time.’

The enquiry agent wrote another cheque. ‘For Heaven’s sake, give me some brandy,’ he moaned and drank greedily at the flask which was offered him. ‘You’ve got your cheque,’ he said with a return of decision to his voice. ‘Now I suppose I may go.’

‘Not yet,’ said the other quietly. ‘There’s a big account against you. This is only a first instalment.’

At two o’clock the next morning a constable saw a belated car draw to the pavement a hundred yards away. Before he had reached the spot, it whirled swiftly away and two strange figures limped toward him leaving a murky stain on the pavement with

each step. He gave an incredulous whistle and rubbed his eyes.

'What kind of a game d'ye call this?' he demanded sternly.

'Get a cab. Take us to a doctor,' groaned one of the figures and, sinking on the pavement, gave way to infantile weeping. The other gibbered incoherently. The policeman shrilled his whistle for assistance and walked doubtfully round the pair.

'If this don't take the bloomin' biscuit,' he asked. 'Two blokes naked as the day they were born and tarred and feathered like Whitehall was the Wild West. Blest if they ain't each got an ace of clubs stuck on the small of their backs. Wish I'd noticed that car more particular.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE RETURN OF STELLA

WINTER stood straddle-legged in front of the mantelpiece, with his hands deep in his trousers pockets, and blew a cloud of smoke in the air. 'Enough is as good as a feast, Wilde,' he proclaimed. 'Your Black Ace is becoming a nuisance. We can't have men tarred and feathered, however much they may deserve it, within a stone's throw of Scotland Yard. I'm afraid to go near the Commissioner. He's bound to ask if the Department is full of half-wits and cripples.'

The crinkles around the corners of Martin Wilde's eyes eased a little. He knew the signs. An unsolved crime afflicts the executive at Scotland Yard with an irritable itch. For though the Yard affects a philosophic indifference to public comment, it is really extremely sensitive. And it is only human nature to relieve the blood pressure by a kick now and again at the man who is doing the job. Nevertheless, he smiled.

'I know,' he said. 'All the same, the thing can't be rushed. We're up against something. A man who can drive a callous old Shylock like Murraystein out of his senses, and terrify a tough bird like Markwell so that he's frightened to say a word, must be worth

meeting. It's a matter of time, sir. I'm working a little more than twenty-four hours a day as it is.'

'What's the strength of this last stunt? You've seen them?'

The inspector crossed his legs and adjusted himself more easily to his chair. 'Oh, yes, I've seen them. They're in the infirmary — moulting — and they are likely to stay there for a bit. The constable who picked them up is about as useful as a sick headache. You've seen his report. These two men were dropped from a car, but as he doesn't know what sort of car it was, nor what the man who drove it was like, nor did the two jettisoned men tell him anything that mattered, he doesn't carry us far. He got help and took them to the infirmary. The night man here, as soon as he heard of the case, telephoned to me and I hot-footed it down to see what I could see. That was nothing. I might as well have stayed in bed. Markwell had been mercilessly flogged before he'd been tarred and feathered. He'd recovered enough to know me, but the doctors say it will be weeks before he is fit again. You couldn't get a word out of him with a tin-opener. His nerve has completely gone. All he would say was that he didn't intend to prosecute, and that what had happened to him was his own affair and no business of mine. The other man sits up in bed and counts interminably on his fingers. So I left them. Sent men down to make enquiries at their homes while I tried their offices my-

self. I found the fire brigade at Murraystein's place, which had been gutted. At Markwell's office there had been a burglary. Some one had been busy burning papers in the grate of his private room and there was a black ace lying on his desk. You might say that Markwell and Murraystein are out of business, since all their records are gone. Our friend is a swift worker.'

The chief constable rolled his cigar to a different angle. 'It's a teaser,' he admitted. 'How many men are on it now?'

'Eight, counting myself.'

'Well, if you want more you must have them if we use every darn man in the C.I.D. I tell you, Wilde,' — he smacked his hands sharply together — 'this has got to stop.'

'We're doing what we can.'

'I know you are. But it doesn't need a telescope to see what is happening. Our American friend is right. Here's a madman, or a gang of madmen, on a lunatic crusade. The longer they dodge us, the worse it will be. We don't know where they will hit next.'

The telephone interrupted him and he lifted the receiver. He stiffened at the first words and, as he barked sharp questions into the instrument, Wilde sat bolt upright and made no secret of his interest. The Chief Constable at last relinquished the receiver with a weary smile.

'A little bit more for your collection, Wilde.

That's the secretary of the Middlesex Hospital. He's just seen the papers. He received two cheques this morning, one signed by Markwell for fifteen thousand pounds, the other by Murraystein for ten thousand. They were in a plain typewritten envelope and the only other enclosure was a black ace.'

Wilde received the news with an unemotional grunt. 'The methods of this gentleman certainly seem effective. I wouldn't have thought that there was a man breathing who could have induced either of them to subscribe five shillings to charity.'

Winter resumed his place by the fire and eyed his subordinate curiously. 'Just one other thing,' he said. 'Your official reports keep to strict facts. I know that you won't commit yourself in writing till you are sure of your ground, but tell me now, unofficially, as man to man, have you got any notion?'

The inspector stood up and their eyes met squarely. 'I'll have to go along to the hospital,' he said.

There was a pause of a second or two. The Chief Constable waited expectantly, and as he realised that the other would go no farther his eyes twinkled. 'All right,' he said. 'I understand. In your place I'd do the same. But make sure.'

Wilde's hand was on the door when, following an abrupt knock, a messenger showed himself. 'Oh, here you are, sir. I was looking for you. There's a

couple of ladies waiting for you downstairs, and they say their business is urgent. Here's a card.'

The inspector read Patricia Langton's name. Written across the card in neat handwriting were the words, 'I have brought her.' He half turned, but with a quick change of mind decided to say nothing to Winter. There would be time enough for that. He ordered the women to be shown to his room.

Patricia Langton wore a little air of triumph as she shook hands. 'I told you three days,' she said. 'I'm within my time limit. You know Miss Cliffe?'

He nodded to the girl and she returned the salute with a flash of white teeth and the suspicion of a wink. No detective inspector, even in his lair at Scotland Yard, could abash Stella Cliffe. 'Mr. Wilde and I are old friends,' she claimed.

Wilde pushed back the lock of hair that dropped over his right eye. 'I congratulate you, Miss Langton,' he said. 'You have put something across us. How did you pull it off?'

She smoothed one finger of her glove. 'Quite simply. I tried to think what I should do had I been in Miss Cliffe's position. Whether she had any reason to fear the police or not, a girl of her kind would not be too anxious to be mixed up in a murder case. Things might come out ——'

Stella yawned delicately. 'Don't mind my feelings, Miss Langton. Get this straight, Mr. Wilde. You Johns ain't got anything on me. Fact is, I didn't

like the idea of my picture in the papers. Bad for business, you understand. So, when I saw a chance for a quiet getaway, I took it.' She hitched her skirt an inch higher and contemplated a shapely leg.

'That was exactly the point of view that I expected her to take,' went on Patricia. 'I should have felt the same myself. I knew the C.I.D. organization had covered every obvious place. She was being sought for in every town in England. But who would dream of looking for a girl like Stella Cliffe in a country village? With the help of the list of her acquaintances that you gave me, I began making enquiries on this line. I found her real name was Jane Grebb. One of her friends told me that she had been brought up in the country. I went to Somerset House and from her birth certificate found that she had been born at a village near Milford in Surrey. I motored down and about the first person I met was Stella herself. She was staying with her parents, who imagined that she was taking a holiday from the store in London where she was supposed to be employed. I persuaded her to come back with me. *Voilà, m'sieu!*' She swept a hand toward the girl.

The detective tapped mechanically on his desk with the butt of a pencil. His face was lowered, so that, if he had given any sign of what was passing in his mind during this recital, it was hidden from the two women. He now turned his gaze slowly on

Patricia. 'But this other woman, the accomplice of the B——' he checked himself — 'of the murderer?'

Miss Langton shrugged her shoulders expressively. 'Perhaps you will be more successful than I in getting Miss Cliffe to talk on that point.'

The pencil tapping ceased and Wilde stared calculatingly at the girl, who returned his look with an expression of naïve but self-possessed innocence. 'It's that way, is it?' he observed. 'Now, Stella,' he went on, 'I don't need to tell you that you're in a funny position. You've got to come across with some explanation and it had better be a good one.' He wagged his head at her solemnly. 'I'm not at all sure about you.'

Stella tossed her head impatiently. She did not seem at all abashed. 'Don't try any third-degree stuff on me. I didn't murder Velvet and I know no more about it than a babe unborn.'

'I never said that you did,' retorted the detective, more mildly. 'What I'm asking you is to tell a plain story that will put you right with every one.'

Her lips parted in a cynical smile. 'Oh, la, la!' she cried. 'Listen to the pretty man go through his tricks, Miss Langton. He thinks I'm an innocent flapper fresh from school. First I'm bullied. Now I'm being coaxed. He expects me to fall for this kind of stuff.'

'Very well,' he said decisively, getting to his feet. 'You're forcing my hand, Stella. Don't forget

I gave you a chance.' His finger hovered over a bell-push.

For the first time the girl lost something of her poise. 'What are you going to do?' she asked.

'Only have you detained until I decide whether you ought to be charged as an accessory or not,' he said.

She touched him on the sleeve. 'Oh, you needn't worry. I'll tell you as much as I can.'

He withdrew his hand. 'Understand,' he said sternly. 'I make no promises. I want everything from A to Z. First of all about Estrehan.' He noted that the question provoked a slight flush. She stood by him for a second without reply. 'Don't stop to think,' he ordered peremptorily. 'Answer!'

Stella Cliffe walked back to her chair, picked up the handbag which was lying upon it, and took out a cigarette-case. With deliberation she selected a cigarette, lit it, and puffed appreciatively. Then she sat down, arranging her position with care.

'Dick,' she said. 'He was just a boob — a sucker. He's a million miles away from this job. You're thinking of what I said at the club. Forget it. When Velvet was bumped off, I was off my feet. I'd bet my last bean that Dick had nothing to do with that.'

'What was the connection between Estrehan and Velvet?'

She took a puff at the cigarette and squinted cynically between half-closed lids at the questioner.

'I reckon you know all about that. Velvet trimmed him — a matter of twenty thou'. If he hadn't done it, some one else would. It was like robbing a blind man. Tell you the truth, we never knew who he was at the time. He was swanking that he was old Simeon Harcroe's son, and had stuff to burn. It was only after we'd left him naked to the world that he 'fessed up to me that he was a city clerk with a few quid a week. Don't know,' she added reflectively, 'but if I'd been wise to that earlier that I should have had my hand in plucking him.'

'So you had a hand in it?' remarked Wilde, his arms sprawled across the desk, his eyes fixed intently on her face.

She opened her eyes widely. 'Of course. I was the piece of candy that lured him on.'

'How did he take it?'

The girl dashed her half-finished cigarette away with unnecessary vigour. 'Hard. I'll say that. He invited me to dinner and I put it to him that he was a first-class boob and I — I was little Stella and a wise grafter. He pulled a gun and held it on me while he proposed to marry me. Honest, he had me scared for a while, and I used to think that I couldn't be scared. I was nearly tempted. I was to be Mrs. Dick and help him get his money back. 'Course I turned him down and he went out. That was the last I saw of him.'

'So he had a gun,' remarked Wilde significantly.

‘Do you know where he went? Have you heard from him since?’

‘No. Not a syllable. All I can say is that he wasn’t at the Gnomes Club when Velvet was done in. I’m dead sure of that. I’d go into the box and swear it. Likely you’ll fish him out of the river one of these days.’

Wilde was quick to pick her up. ‘How do you know he wasn’t at the Gnomes Club?’ he asked swiftly. ‘You didn’t see the murderer?’

The question took her unawares. She started and the colour faded from her cheek as she realized her slip. An instant later she was herself again. ‘Well, I’m sure he wasn’t there,’ she insisted. ‘I’d certainly have seen him.’

The detective switched to another point. ‘What had brought Velvet and you there? Was there any special reason? Were you expecting to meet any one?’

‘No. We’d had dinner together and just strolled in for a bit of fun. We’d only just come when it — it happened.’

‘I see.’ He gave a little thought to the next question. ‘Then, while you were telling me that Estrehan was the murderer, you fainted. What made you think that he had anything to do with it if you are so sure now that he was not there?’

‘I didn’t know what I was saying.’

‘Very well. What happened after you fainted?’

Her lips came together in a firm line and she looked straight in front without reply. He repeated the question. 'You were smuggled out of the place by some woman. Who was it?'

'I don't know,' she said.

'You mean that you won't say?'

'I don't know,' she declared again. 'Look here, Mr. Wilde,' she added with asperity. 'I'm a dirty little grafter and all that, but there's one thing that you've never found me do and I'm not going to begin now. I've never been a squealer, least of all on a pal. This woman — I'd never seen her before that night — thought that she was doing me a turn. If you want her to tell you anything, you go and find her. You won't get anything out of me, so stick that in your pipe and smoke it.'

Wilde passed a hand across his brow. 'All right,' he said amiably. 'Don't get disturbed about it, Stella. You didn't go home again after the murder, I know that. Where did you sleep that night?'

'Find out,' she snapped.

'Don't fear. I will,' he returned.

It was an hour before he gave up the attempt to break down her silence. Point by point he carried her over the whole of her story while he slowly took it down on paper. There was no discrepancy in the second and more detailed version of her story. But every time he tried to surprise her into some admission about the ally of the Black Ace, she parried his

thrusts dourly. He gave up at last and let her sign what he regarded as an incomplete statement. But before he said good-bye he made an excuse to slip from the room.

‘I want two good men,’ he demanded of a subordinate. ‘When Stella Cliffe leaves this place, I wish to know her every movement, and every person she may speak to.’

CHAPTER IX

WILDE MEETS THE BLACK ACE

THE art of shadowing has been brought to a very fine perfection by Scotland Yard. But none know better than the men of the Criminal Investigation Department that no reasonably alert person can be trailed for any length of time without becoming aware of the fact. Martin Wilde had no expectation that such a wide-awake person as Stella Cliffe would not, within a short while, realize that she was being watched. It was likely, however, that some little period might elapse before she became conscious of her followers. In that time it was just possible that she might do something indiscreet.

Wilde had to confess himself baffled as to the part this girl of the underworld was playing in the drama. His first impression had been that she was merely a lay figure with no direct connection with the case. That view had been shaken when she disappeared. Her attitude now puzzled him. By all the rules a girl of her antecedents who had been innocently involved should have behaved differently. She should have been anxious to exculpate herself at any cost. His reason told him that she must be deep in the case, yet his instinct was against that conclusion.

There would have been justification for holding

her as one under suspicion, but he had felt that that would be bad tactics. Stella was probably only a pawn — though an important pawn — in the game. He did not want the little fish until he was sure of the bigger ones. While she was at large, there was always a chance that some slip might betray her confederates. For, although the shadowing might fail, there were other ways by which a hint might come to him. Among her acquaintances were men and women who for fear or favour would not hesitate to reveal to the men of the Yard anything that came to them. At any rate, he had no fear that he should again lose sight of her.

There were other matters demanding his attention and he dismissed the girl from his mind to deal with them. In the course of hours a man drifted in to him. The inspector, collating a thick dossier of reports, looked up impatiently.

‘Well, Linke,’ he demanded. ‘What do you want?’

‘It’s about this girl Cliffe, sir.’

‘Ah.’ Wilde pushed the papers away and leaned back in his chair, prepared to listen. ‘What about her?’

The young detective — he looked like a spruce salesman — cleared his throat. ‘I don’t know whether it’s important, sir, but I thought I ought to report right away. I’ve left Honson outside her old rooms in Earls Court, and as Moody is also on duty there — he’s been observing the place disguised as a

road-sweeper ever since she disappeared — it seemed a good opportunity to get back to you, while they kept an eye on her. She and the lady she was with took a taxi from outside here to Piccadilly Circus, where they got out, said good-bye to each other, and separated. Cliffe strolled up Regent Street looking at the shop windows. She spoke to only one person on the way. That was Swift Jack, the con man. We couldn't hear the conversation.'

'Never mind that,' interjected Wilde, making a mental note. 'Did she spot you at all?'

Linke smiled with a touch of complacency. 'You can trust me that she didn't. She passed on after a few minutes and turned into Oxford Street. It appeared rather as if she was killing time. Then she went into one of the big stores and spent some time shopping. We found that she ordered all the goods to be sent to her rooms at Earls Court.'

'What kind of things did she buy?'

'Mostly clothes. She was a long time there. She had lunch in the store's restaurant, and sat for a while drinking coffee. At a quarter past two she went to the telephone. I entered the adjoining box. It was impossible to hear what she said, but I got onto the operator and found that the number she was ringing' — he consulted a notebook — 'was Central 20043.'

Wilde smoothed his chin. 'Who was that?' he asked.

The young man gave a shake of the head. 'I didn't

think it wise to follow it up at the time. She was on the point of leaving. Afterwards she went straight home to Earls Court. We saw her safely home and I came away to report.'

Wilde uncoiled his gaunt figure from his desk. 'There might be something in this,' he commented. 'Ring up the Central Exchange and find out to whom the number belongs. Then we'll take a little walk.'

Within ten minutes he and Linke were on their way to Messrs. Maule, James and Company, East India Merchants, in Farringdon Street. The inspector knew that there was no certainty that this new line would lead anywhere. The message sent by Stella might be quite innocent. On the other hand, there was a possibility that she would be concerned to report the result of her visit to Scotland Yard. There was at least a reasonable chance.

They found the name of Maule, James and Company inscribed on a brass plate at the entrance to a small block of offices, with an indication that the affairs of the firm were carried out on the third floor. There was no lift and they climbed the stairs to the second floor, which was occupied by a firm of paper agents. Here Wilde took the opportunity of making a few enquiries. He explained to the head of the paper firm that he was associated with a wholesale boot factory, and desired to know something of the standing of Maule, James and Company who wished to open an account. The paper man knew little. The

overhead offices had been taken and furnished some six weeks before, and he had passed the time of day on the stairs with Mr. James, who seemed to be the only active member of the firm. There was only one clerk, a kind of black man.

Thanking his informant, Wilde moved up to the next flight. Signalling to his companion to remain on the landing, he listened at the outer door of the office. The clatter of a typewriter was the only sound that came to him. He gave a perfunctory tap and flung the door open.

From a typewriter at the other end of the room, a man looked up and, as the visitor entered, put by a cigarette and came to the counter. In a swift and apparently casual glance the inspector took in a well-dressed and spectacled young Eurasian who moved listlessly across the room toward him. But in that nonchalant look Wilde saw something that caused the lines on his face to deepen momentarily.

‘One of the heads of the firm in?’ he asked.

The Eurasian shook his head. ‘You have just missed Mr. James. Mr. Maule is in India.’

A little exclamation of annoyance came to the lips of the detective. ‘That’s the dickens of a nuisance. I wished to see some one badly. I have come specially from Blackburn. I represent the Grand Eastern Textile Corporation.’

‘I am sorry,’ said the Eurasian. ‘If you will leave a message ——’

'I don't know.' Wilde's hands fidgeted uncertainly on the counter while his face was full of perplexity. 'It's very urgent. Have you any idea when the next boat leaves for Bombay?'

The Eurasian stared blankly. 'I couldn't say,' he replied.

'But you could look it up,' persisted Wilde.

Again there was a doubtful shake of the head.

'Soor,' remarked Wilde conversationally.

'I beg your pardon,' said the other.

Wilde laughed, and, leaning across the counter, caught the other by the wrists. 'You're too innocent for this game, my young friend,' he said. 'Why did you stain the inside of your hands? Don't you know that the colour of the palms should be less deep there? I called you a swine in your own language and you did not understand me. And I asked you what any office boy in the genuine Indian trade could have answered and you didn't know. This office is a fake — and you're a fake. What about it? Going to make any fuss?'

Beneath his stain Dick Estrehan felt the blood drain from his cheeks. He struggled ineffectually to free his hands, but it would have taken a stronger man than he to shake off Martin Wilde. He relinquished the effort and stared dully at the deep-set, menacing eyes that looked into his. His breath came in short, sharp gasps.

'What has it got to do with you?' he demanded

with feeble bravado. 'I'm not doing anything wrong.'

'We'll see about that,' said Wilde grimly. 'There's lots of things I want to ask you. Now you be a good boy and don't stir.' He relinquished his grip and took a step to move round the counter. A gulping sob and a thud made him wheel on his heels and tear the door open. A hand came through the opening and the blue muzzle of an automatic came to a steady rest within a foot of his chest. 'Put up your hands, Mr. Wilde,' said a pleasant voice. 'I seem to be just in time.'

Wilde was no coward, but neither was he a fool. His hands went above his head and his chagrin found expression in a well-chosen oath.

'Please don't swear,' went on the voice. 'At least, keep your voice low. If any one should interfere just now, it might be fatal to you. And you will do me a favour if you will continue to face this way and to step backwards. Thompson, be good enough to collect the gentleman from outside. He might attract attention. You will have gathered, Mr. Wilde, that he has met with a little accident. You should really warn your men to be more careful.'

The detective, with every nerve tingling and alert, backed slowly into the inner office, but his face had regained its usual impassivity. A tall, masked figure followed him closely, and the detective diagnosed that the pause at the door had been

for the purpose of adjusting the mask. He registered such features as he could see closely upon his memory. Sometime, somewhere, he would meet this man in other circumstances.

Meanwhile Estrehan followed them, dragging the unconscious body of Linke from the landing. Breathless with the exertion, he left his burden on the carpeted floor of the inner room and straightened himself. 'Thank you, Thompson,' said the stranger. 'That will do. Kindly lock the door and remain in the outer office.'

Wilde cast an anxious glance upon his colleague. 'He looks pretty bad,' he commented in a loud voice that was intended to reach Estrehan. 'If you have killed him, you and your nigger minstrel friend will have another murder to answer for.'

The other made a menacing gesture with his weapon. 'Don't attempt to frighten Thompson,' he commanded. 'Bluff won't worry him. As for that fellow' — he nodded carelessly toward the injured detective — 'he'll wake up with nothing worse than a sore head in an hour or two. There's a couch over there, Mr. Wilde. Make yourself at home. If you give me your assurance that you're not armed, you may take your hands down.'

'Thank you,' said Wilde. 'I've got no gun. — But I assure you that after this I shall make a point of carrying one.'

'Always a wise precaution in your profession, I

should imagine,' assented the other, sinking into a big armchair facing the detective, the hand with the pistol resting on his knee. 'But let's get down to business. How did you find this place?'

Wilde, nursing his knee in both hands, rocked gently to and fro with a half-smile on his face. 'Ask me,' he returned with irony.

His questioner tapped the floor with his foot. 'I scarcely expected you to give away your methods,' he observed. 'I must have slipped up somewhere. I hate to make mistakes. I confess I underestimated you. It is not the least use asking you how much you know, is it?'

Wilde yawned elaborately. 'I suppose you are the fellow who deals out the black aces?' he countered.

'Your deduction is accurate,' agreed the other politely. 'I am that very man.'

'In that case,' said Wilde, 'it seems to me that you're in the position of the man who had hold of the tiger's tail. You daren't hang on and you daren't let go. You know' — he hitched his chair a little closer — 'you're not the kind of man who would shoot me in cold blood. You're three stories up and a shot would bring all sorts of curious people here. You couldn't escape. On the whole, it strikes me that you're more up against it than I am. What are you going to do with me now?' His eyes looked sidelong at the other.

'Don't be too sure of what I may do,' said the

stranger easily. 'I'd be reluctant to kill you, but higher considerations might force that upon me yet.' His voice was cold and passionless as though he were discussing some small point of business policy. 'But, although this meeting is accidental, I confess I'm not altogether sorry about it. I have wanted to meet you, but there have been obvious difficulties. This gives me an opportunity to say something I have in mind.'

'If I may smoke,' said Wilde calmly, 'you may talk all day for all of me. I'm in no hurry.'

'Smoke by all means,' agreed the other, and Wilde stuffed his pipe with a steady hand and blew a cloud of smoke ceilingwards.

'This is what I wanted to say,' went on the masked man. 'You're a man-hunter by profession — a paid agent of the law. Ethics don't bother you much. A man breaks the law or he doesn't break the law. You're only concerned with one sort. There are villains you can't touch. I'll admit that you put away more bad men than you do good ones — but so probably did Pontius Pilate. Now I also am a man-hunter. I get no pay — in fact I am heavily out of pocket. I run enormous risks. And I punish those who deserve punishment according to their deserts.'

Wilde's eyebrows came together. 'You make yourself police officer, judge, jury, and executioner,' he remarked. 'You've elected yourself to some job!'

'Because there is no other way in the present state

of civilization of teaching men the higher law,' asserted the stranger. 'So long as men can do evil with impunity they will continue to do so. No consideration will deter them but one — the fear of punishment. If they know that there is another power than the written law which may at any time call them to account — if they realize that their lack of scruple can bring them no profit — then the world may be fit to live in. I do not pretend to be infallible and I am selecting at first the more glaring cases in which no mistake is possible. When my organization is perfected, I shall go more fully into the doubtful cases.'

'I am a little curious,' interrupted Wilde, 'as to what all this is leading up to. Are you trying to convert me?'

The other leaned forward. 'I don't know if you have ever devoted any thought to these things. You are an intelligent man and during your career you must have come across many instances that if you paused to think would convince you that I am right. Who have made these men that you have put in prison criminals? The very people who take good care that their own skins are safe. I will leave that aspect to your conscience. There is another side. Scotland Yard can hamper me — it cannot stop me. You may sneer, but that is the truth. Now if there was some person — a man say of high rank in the Criminal Investigation Department — who was

working with me, I could carry my plans much farther. Take yourself. You have got so far. Where will you finish? In the course of years you will be put on the shelf with a pittance of a pension. Suppose that you agreed to ally yourself with me. I can make you a rich man. If you are seeking thrills I can give you those that you have never known. I believe you to be a sincere and conscientious man. What a pair we should make! We could scourge crime till the world would become a new Eden. Think what it would mean!

With difficulty, in spite of the gravity of the situation, the detective resisted an inclination to laugh. But he maintained a grave face, and puffed stolidly at his pipe. 'You ran that off so pat that I suspect you have said something of the sort before. What it all boils down to is that you are proposing a bribe to me. I am to sell the people who pay me. And yet you think that I am a sincere and conscientious man.'

'No,' broke in the man in the mask. 'It is not a bribe. I am to enlist your services and I will pay what I consider they are worth taking the risks into consideration. You might make as much as ten thousand pounds a year.'

'A bit more than the Prime Minister of England,' reflected Wilde aloud. 'That's big money. I am almost ——' he left the sentence unfinished and it was plain that he was labouring under severe tension.

'I am, as you say, likely to be a poor man all my life. I do not know you. I have not even seen your face. How do I know that you have got this money? How can I tell that you will not double-cross me?'

'I appreciate the reasons for your hesitation,' said the other. 'I don't blame you for wanting guarantees. If, say, I paid you ten thousand in advance, would it meet your doubts?'

Seemingly unconscious of the act, Wilde rose leisurely to his feet, half-turned away and stretched his arms. 'When could I have this money?' he asked, and before the other could reply, he had made a tigerish leap, turning as he sprang. His first objective was the pistol. Once rid of that and it would be man to man. With a back-handed throw he jerked the weapon through the window and his full weight crashed heavily onto the masked man.

CHAPTER X

MR. THOROLD'S EARS

THEY were both strong men, but the advantage of the attack was with Wilde. It was no time for the niceties of combat, and he tried to batter the head of his antagonist against the floor. Suddenly he became aware that another person was circling about them, and he remembered Estrehan. Forcing the full weight of his knee into the stomach of his immediate adversary, he relinquished his hold on the other's throat with one hand, and fumbled at a pocket with the other to get at his police whistle.

With a writhing sideways jerk the man beneath contrived to pull himself partly free. 'Use a chair, man, a chair!' he directed Estrehan breathlessly. Something descended with stunning force on Wilde's head. A wave of blackness surged about him.

He awoke with aching temples and stiffly drew himself to his feet. His senses were instantly alert. At the other end of the room lay Linke, breathing stertorously. They were alone in the room.

Wilde's first movement was to the door. He tugged at it fiercely with such force that the handle came away in his hand. It was locked. He turned to the telephone and swore as he saw that the flex had been cut. There remained the window, but a glance

disposed of that. It looked down on the black roofs of a few outbuildings and beyond these was the railway line.

He bent over Linke and was surprised to see that the wound on the other's head had been skilfully bandaged with a pocket handkerchief. There was nothing more he could do for his assistant. He picked up his pipe from the carpet where it had fallen, filled it mechanically, and, seating himself at the big chair that flanked the desk, puffed big clouds of smoke while he pondered the situation.

Thus a quarter of an hour passed. At last he heard, dimly, a heavy knock on the outer door. He laid down his pipe and raised his voice. 'Send for the police. I am locked in with an injured man.'

'We are the police,' there came a faint answer.

'Then get an axe and break the bally door down,' he retorted, and resumed his seat and his pipe. There was nothing he could do but wait.

Presently he heard a crash as the outer door gave. In a little, forceful blows descended about the lock of the inner door and he rose as a big sergeant and constable of the City police, red-faced from their exertions, burst into the room.

'What does all this mean?' demanded the sergeant peremptorily.

'I'm not quite sure that I know myself,' answered Wilde, tapping out his pipe. 'I'm Chief Inspector Wilde of the C.I.D. This' — he jerked his head to-

ward the unconscious Linke — 'is one of my staff. We ran into a little trouble while making an enquiry.' He displayed his warrant card. 'I don't want this talked about. How came you to get here, sergeant?'

The other mopped his face with a red pocket handkerchief. 'Telephone call to the station, sir,' he said. 'Somebody from a call office said we were wanted urgently at this place. Gave the name of the firm and the address, and rang off.'

'Very nice of 'em,' commented Wilde. 'I'm glad you came. You, constable, had better fetch a doctor. I'll ask you to hang on, sergeant, and if any one calls detain him. I've got to get back to the Yard. I'll send some one along to take charge. See that nothing is touched.'

He took the stairs two at a time, and an opportune taxi rushed him to Scotland Yard. Within three minutes of his arrival, a flying Squad car had left for Farringdon Street. Wilde gave a few directions to others that were to set the wires busy wherever they touched a police station and went into close session with Winter.

Within a quarter of an hour he emerged thoughtfully from the conference, and his brow was still wrinkled when he rang the bell of Quenton Thorold's house in Clarges Street. The well-drilled manservant glanced at his card with expressionless face. 'I believe that Mr. Thorold is out, sir,' he said, 'but I will see.'

He was turning away when the detective put a detaining finger on his arm. 'What is your name?' he asked.

'Watkins, sir — Hector Watkins.' The man's sleek face showed no surprise at the question. It was as immobile as his tone was deferential.

'And you have been with Mr. Thorold some time?'

'Only during the last month or two, sir. I was with the late Lord Larne, who you will remember died suddenly while visiting the States. In the circumstances I was glad to take an engagement with Mr. Thorold just before he sailed.'

'I see. Now, if I asked you, Watkins, could you tell me at what times your master has been at home lately?'

Watkins stiffened. 'I think you had better question Mr. Thorold himself, sir,' he said, with a cold dignity that would have caused another man than Wilde to wilt.

'Thank you. Will you see if he's in?'

'Now,' mused Wilde, as the servant departed, 'I've been and gone and made a blithering ass of myself. That lad will tell Thorold I've been getting at him.'

Watkins returned swiftly. 'Mr. Thorold will see you, sir,' he said blandly, and the detective followed him.

Quenton Thorold was lounging with legs stretched out to a blazing fire, although the day was warm.

'Come right in, Wilde!' he cried. 'Bring some drinks, Watkins. Sit down, Wilde. You observe me lost in thought. Although apparently idle, my massive brain is working overtime on your behalf. I have found your friend.'

Watkins placed a decanter and glasses on a low table near to his master's hand and noiselessly retired. Wilde flung himself into a chair.

'Never mind about the drinks,' he said sharply. 'What's this about Estrehan?'

Thorold rubbed the back of his neck listlessly. 'Nothing. I was on the point of telephoning to you. I have found out where he is. I would scorn to deceive you, my dear Watson. He is disguised as a nigger, and he is acting as a clerk to Messrs. Maule, James and Company of Farringdon Street.'

There was an almost imperceptible pause before the detective answered. 'I know that. I have just come from there.'

The millionaire sat jerkily upright, and turned an astonished face toward the detective. 'Don't be so abrupt, Wilde. You startle me. "'Twas ever thus. From childhood's hour I've seen my fondest hopes decay.'" Here am I flattering myself that I'm two jumps ahead of the smartest bull from Scotland Yard, and now you calmly tell me that you were in first. You've spoiled my day. It's too doggoned bad, upon my soul it is.'

Wilde leaned forward, his deepset eyes grim. 'I'll

be obliged, Mr. Thorold,' he said, evenly, 'if you will tell me how you managed to get this information?'

'Hello! You're becoming portentous. I thought you would have been pleased with me. But I don't mind disclosing my methods. I just asked Stella Cliffe.'

'You — asked — Stella. And she told you?'

'I've a way with women. I could never explain it to you, Wilde. It's just a gift.' He rose to his feet, stood before the fire, and stretched his arms. 'As a matter of fact, I saw Stella just before Miss Langton brought her to you. She was guarded. But just before she went she asked if she might use the telephone. She got through to some one and reported that "Rice" was to be questioned at Scotland Yard, but it would be all right. "Rice" was all there and not to worry. It was clear that "Rice" was herself. I made a mental note of the number and asked her if the man at the other end of the wire was her sweetheart. She laughed and admitted that it might be. After she had gone I took the liberty of enquiring from the telephone people the name and address to which she had telephoned. Then I strolled to Farringdon Street, and dropped in on Messrs. Maule, James and Company. I enquired for a firm which I alleged had once occupied their offices. I was attended by a brown man. You will remember you gave me a photograph of Estrehan. I had little

difficulty in recognizing him under his paint. Quite simple, ain't it?'

'It sounds entirely plausible. You couldn't have been quicker at the business had you been the Black Ace himself. But I was luckier than you were in Farringdon Street. I saw the Black Ace.'

An exclamation from Thorold was half-smothered by a cough. 'You don't say! Just my luck. I suppose the whole show is over and he's under arrest?'

'No. He isn't under arrest, although it is possible he soon will be. He laid me out and managed to get away. He wore a mask, but I should know him again for all that.'

Thorold puckered his lips in a long-drawn whistle. 'What did you make of him? What sort of bird was he?'

'He was,' asserted Wilde, speaking very slowly, and his eyes searching the other's face narrowly, 'a man of about your height and age. His voice had a slight touch of American accent, although, of course, that may have been assumed.'

'In fact it might have been me?' said Thorold quietly.

'In fact it might have been you,' agreed Wilde.

The eyes of the two men met. Suddenly the millionaire flung himself back in his chair in an explosion of mirth. 'Oh, Wilde, you'll be the death of me!' he gasped. 'Really, you shouldn't.' He pressed a cushion to his face and emerged at last very red in

the face. 'What will Pat say?' He observed something in Wilde's hand, and went off into another peal of laughter. 'If the man hasn't got a gun! Don't shoot, colonel. I'll come down.'

'When you've quite finished,' said Wilde dourly, 'you will be interested to know that there are a dozen men within call.'

Thorold composed himself with an obvious effort. 'You've taken precautions. The Black Ace is a dangerous character, evidently. I'll be good. How did you come to suspect me?'

'I suspected you,' said Wilde, 'from the moment you handed me the torch immediately after Velvet was shot at the Gnomes Club. You had a gun on you and there had been time while the lights were out to clean it and replace the spent cartridge. That was clever. And then you had the audacity to offer to help in the investigations. I accepted because it was the easiest way to keep an eye on you.'

'Of course,' went on Wilde, 'all this might have been coincidence. You might have been just as ingenuous as you appeared when you offered us your help. But if you were the Black Ace, I knew that I was up against a cleverer man than myself, so I decided to be entirely frank and open with you — to a point. I confided in you because if I had not done so you might have guessed my real hand. I'll confess things have come my way quicker than I anticipated. I've got you and I've got the evidence.'

'Ah, the evidence.' Thorold lit a cigarette and held it in one hand while he blew out the match. 'Let's hear about the evidence. A fellow learns by his mistakes. Where have I blundered?'

'It can't do any harm to let you know. In the first place, it soon became obvious that the Black Ace had money — heaps of it. You are a millionaire. Then the cards used by him were of American manufacture. You are an American. You were infernally apropos when the murder of Velvet occurred — so near to me that you might even have pinched my card-case and passed it to an accomplice — say Miss Langton — to enable her to sneak Stella Cliffe out.'

'Pat would hate to be left out of this,' said Thorold thoughtfully.

'Don't worry about her. She's being looked after,' said the detective. 'When you introduced me to her, I began to have a glimmering how the disappearing trick had been done. You will remember that picturesque stroke when she, you, and I received black aces as we were talking. I took the liberty of writing a note shortly afterwards. I wanted some samples of your stationery. Would it interest you, Mr. Thorold, to learn that those cards were enclosed in envelopes which are identical with the envelopes used in this house?'

'That's awkward,' interposed the millionaire, idly brushing some ash from his waistcoat. 'I must be more careful about my stationery.'

‘Finally,’ added Wilde, ‘there was the little episode of to-day. A mask is not a perfect disguise. There was one feature of the Black Ace which I saw so clearly that I could identify it anywhere. Are you aware that it is impossible to disguise the ear?’

‘So you are going to hang me because of my ears,’ said Thorold. He walked to the window and stood sideways to the detective so that the light fell on one ear.

Wilde’s jaw dropped. He stared incredulously.

‘I have been intensely interested in your speculations,’ said Thorold. ‘You dropped a few words on the dangers of theories when we first met. I hate to disappoint you, but I am not the subtle villain you have built up. I am not the Black Ace.’

CHAPTER XI

PADDY THE GHOST

IT was one of Martin Wilde's qualities that he was able to see a joke against himself. Chagrined as he was, the corners of his mouth were upturned as he left the house. He strode across the road to a waiting taxi. Any one watching would have seen the driver jerk his head toward the lowered flag which denoted that the cab was engaged while Wilde seemed to expostulate with him.

'Hang on for another ten minutes,' ordered the inspector. 'You'll become too obvious after that. I'll give Jenkins a word. If nothing happens, get back to the Yard and tell Mr. Winter I'll see him later on.'

At the corner of Clarges Street and Piccadilly an itinerant vendor thrust a tray of matches forward. Wilde fumbled for a coin. 'Looks like a false alarm, Jenkins,' he said. 'You, Salter, and Dare had better keep observation until you hear from me. Tell the rest they can go.'

Lighting his pipe, he sauntered leisurely along Piccadilly and turning into the Haymarket passed through the portals of a picture theatre. It was rarely that he paid the movies a visit. But in moments of mental tension he found the semi-darkness

refreshing. There was no risk of interruption to a continuity of thought. He could get his mind down to a problem.

Thus he remained for an hour staring vacantly at the silver screen. He saw nothing of the pictures. He was trying to readjust himself to a reshuffle of the facts with which he had to deal. Not often had Wilde been so cocksure that he was approaching the core of a mystery as when he had made that mental note of the ears of the Black Ace. Quenton Thorold had been within a hair's breadth of arrest — indeed, Wilde had gone to his house with that intention. If he could have established identity, the rest of the investigation would have resolved itself into a comparatively simple detective problem of organized enquiry and search. It is quite often much easier to trace back from the criminal to the crime than from the crime to the criminal.

He looked at his watch and realized with a shock that it was getting toward seven o'clock. Like most well-ordered business establishments, Scotland Yard closes down about six, leaving a skeleton night staff except in times of emergency. Winter would be wondering what had happened to him.

As he pushed his way out, some one seated near the aisle snicked a finger against his knee. He passed along, apparently unheeding, but in the lighted foyer he halted with the air of one irresolute. Close at his heels was a man who passed quickly to

one side of the box office. Wilde joined him and the other dropped his hand on his sleeve. Not a word was spoken.

An instant later a young man came into the foyer and glanced hurriedly around. Wilde stepped out.

‘Looking for me, Paddy?’ he asked mildly.

‘Why, hello, Mr. Wilde,’ exclaimed the other heartily. ‘I didn’t know you were here. I’ve got a date with a pal and he hasn’t turned up.’

Wilde’s companion joined them. ‘I saw this bird tailing you along Piccadilly, sir,’ he explained. ‘I thought I’d join in.’

‘Me? Tailing Mr. Wilde?’ Paddy, who was known to a select circle as ‘Paddy the Ghost’ — a tribute to a quality of quiet elusiveness which he exercised on occasion — regarded the Vine Street man who had accused him with astonishment in every line of his innocent, clean-shaven face. ‘What on earth would I be tailing Mr. Wilde for?’

‘That’s what we want to know. What was it for?’ demanded Wilde.

Paddy’s eyes met his boldly. ‘I wasn’t following you,’ he asserted.

‘Nice suit of clothes you’re wearing,’ observed Wilde inconsequentially. ‘See you’ve got a gold chain as well. Have you a watch to go with it?’

‘What about it?’ demanded Paddy.

‘Nothing. Oh, nothing. You must have come into quite a bit of money lately. You always were

a dressy lad when you could run to it. Who's your tailor, Paddy?'

Paddy wagged his head and smiled a trifle wryly. It is always well to appreciate the banter of a chief detective inspector. But he remained undaunted. 'That won't get you anywhere, Mr. Wilde. You can't scare me. My money's honestly come by. I've been lucky racing.'

'Glad to hear that you're going straight. Hope the strain isn't too much for you. All the same, we may have to look up some of the things that have happened lately just in case your memory is at fault.' Wilde turned to the Vine Street man. 'Paddy and I are going to have a little private talk. I'll remember that you gave me this tip. Come on, Paddy. You'll walk along the road with me for a little. Then you can see where I'm going without any trouble.'

They moved away arm in arm. 'Now,' said the inspector genially. 'We're all alone. I'm surprised to find that you carry a gun, Paddy. I can feel it under your armpit. You contracted the habit in the States, I suppose. Now you hand it over to me and tell me the whole story like a good boy.'

Paddy came near to a flush as he passed the weapon to the detective. 'There's no story to tell,' he said. 'I carry a gun because there's a lot of toughs on the race-course who don't love me. I've been making a lot of money there as I said just now.'

'I heard you say so,' agreed the detective. 'I hope you'll be able to prove it.'

'I'll prove it all right — if I've got to,' declared Paddy.

'You heard that Old Dutchy had been done down, I suppose,' said Wilde.

'Yes. But you won't get me on that, Mr. Wilde. I've got a good alibi. Crest thought he could rope me for that job, but he was all out. I showed him that I'd got witnesses a-plenty to say I was at Liverpool when it was pulled off.'

'Alibis are useful things. But they have to be watertight. Maybe Crest was a little too easily satisfied. I'm not suggesting anything, but that job was done by a workman, Paddy. If you hadn't told me yourself, I'd have said there was only one man who could have carried it through so neatly. I'm going to look into it myself.'

'Good luck to you,' retorted Paddy with a shade of irony.

'You never play cards, do you?' asked the detective.

A shadow flickered for an instant on Paddy's face. 'Sometimes,' he admitted.

'Well, I shouldn't,' advised Wilde solemnly. 'Many a man's been shot — or hanged — for having too many aces. Take my tip and stick to racing. That's all. You may go. Perhaps I may see you again.'

He left Paddy standing with a thoughtful gaze on the lank form that strode away in the direction of Scotland Yard.

Winter was struggling into a hat and coat when Wilde entered his room. 'I'd about given you up,' he declared. 'I hear the thing was a fizzle.'

Wilde dropped into a chair. 'A complete fizzle. Quenton Thorold is not the man I saw in Farringdon Street.' He recited the story of his interview with the millionaire. 'Thorold simply laughed at me,' he concluded.

'He would,' observed the chief constable. 'Well, that puts an end to the idea that our friend is the Black Ace.' He caressed his chin thoughtfully. 'Farringdon Street is a wash-out.'

'Who engaged the office? Who bought the furniture?'

'That was followed up. Every description varies in vital particulars.' He spread his hands in a whimsical gesture. 'Your Black Ace is tall and short, fat and slim, bearded and unshaven, fair and dark, old and young. All we have to do is to find him. The thing's uncanny, Wilde. And at any time he may break out in a new place.'

A half-smile broke on Wilde's face. He did not believe the chief constable was so pessimistic as he would appear. Winter had his own methods of gingering up his subordinates. 'We're not a dead end yet, sir,' he remarked. 'I still have hopes. We

know that Stella Cliffe and Estrehan are in association with this man. And this evening there showed up a third person who gives another opening.' He related his encounter with Paddy. 'That's three persons of whom we are sure. I can't see each of them avoiding a false step. Besides, there's Thorold.'

'Don't talk in conundrums, Wilde. I thought he was cleared.'

'He was certainly not the man I ran against in Farringdon Street. It remains that he was on the spot when Velvet was killed. We know nothing of his movements on the night when Dutchy's safe was robbed. Nor do we know his whereabouts when the other two fellows were tarred and feathered. But we do know that he has oodles of money. We do know that stationery like his has been used by the Black Ace. I am not satisfied, sir. I half-thought of searching the house.'

'I'm glad you didn't. The man has influential friends and there would likely have been trouble — especially if you had found nothing to implicate him. We're likely to have enough on our hands without stirring up a hornet's nest. No. Forget Thorold. As for the stationery, that may be sheer coincidence. Other people use those envelopes.'

'You may be right,' assented Wilde doubtfully. 'But I intend to have my eye on him. I left men still keeping observation.'

Winter paced to and fro across the room, his jaw set, and two deep creases between his eyes. 'I won't interfere,' he said at last, 'but I think it's simple waste of time to bother any more about Thorold. What are you going to do next?'

'If you don't mind I think you had better not ask me that question — yet,' said Wilde.

His superior dropped a hand on his shoulder. 'Don't get in too deep,' he observed. 'Good-night, Wilde.'

He disappeared and Wilde went to his own room. There are things sometimes done by the Criminal Investigation Department which only the event can justify and for which a man must shoulder his own responsibility. Both Winter and Wilde understood the game. If the latter had frankly declared his immediate purpose, the Chief Constable must have forbidden it or have been implicated in a technical illegality should it go astray.

The first action Wilde had taken on his return to Scotland Yard had been to instruct two men to go over the flat of Paddy the Ghost with or without his permission. The fiction that an Englishman's house is his castle is subject to circumstances. Wilde had felt that there was no time for the strict formality of obtaining a search warrant.

It was a step in the dark, for he had little reason to suppose that anything of importance to the investigation would be found. On the other hand,

Paddy might have been incautious. There might be something to connect him with the burglary at Dutchy Ogle's — although that was unlikely. Paddy, no doubt, had been one of the first of the skilled burglars on whom suspicion had fallen, and Crest, the divisional inspector, had failed to amass any evidence against him. But then Crest knew nothing of the Black Ace, nor that Paddy was concerned with him. If the Black Ace had really put Paddy on to shadow Wilde, there might be some evidence of communication between them. Wilde was taking one of those gambles which are inevitable in every criminal investigation.

His emissaries returned in the course of an hour. One of them laid a little bundle of letters and an envelope full of tiny scraps of torn paper in front of Wilde. 'That is all we were able to find, sir,' he reported. 'There is one letter that reads a little queerly.'

'H'm,' commented the inspector. 'Have much trouble?'

'Everything as smooth as butter,' declared one. 'Paddy was at home and he raised no kick at all. Said he'd expected that you would send along. Offered us a drink and asked us to make ourselves comfortable. When we began nosing around, he seemed to want to shy us off one little desk. Said he had only just bought it and didn't have the key. So we forced the drawers.'

‘And you found these?’ Wilde tapped the letters.

‘Not in the drawers. There was a recess beneath one of them. We might have overlooked it if Paddy had not taken so much trouble for a hiding-place.’

‘Where did you come across these scraps?’

‘A waste-paper basket by the side of the desk. Paddy didn’t seem concerned about them.’

‘Thanks. That’ll do,’ said Wilde.

He settled down to examine the letters. There were six of them and five seemed commonplace enough — at a first glance he could discover nothing compromising in any of them. It was the sixth, however, that riveted his attention, and he read it through again and again. The thing had been laboriously inscribed in irregular block letters and ran:

Thanks for your good offices in our little affair. No doubt the thing has taken longer than we expected but to be safe will try to arrange another trip across the Channel fairly soon. Let me know what Jones thinks about it. C is a street ahead and you can pick him for a winner. Put up all you can and watch closely all the market movements. Jones will be careful.

‘I wonder what little game Paddy has on that needs another trip across the Channel,’ he muttered to himself. ‘I’ll tell the guv’nor to put the French police wise to this.’

Wilde flung the letter aside and slipped away to return in a short while with a couple of square sheets of plate glass and a glass of water. On one

of the sheets he began to play a sort of jigsaw puzzle with the pieces of the torn letter, moistening each scrap slightly to hold it in place on the glass. It was a tedious and lengthy operation, for the pieces were small. But at last he finished and read:

Can you send for the goods fairly soon? In the event of it being impossible to make a deal refer matter immediately to the chief. Will take them at any price they nominate so long as you guarantee that no tricks are tried. All of them should be packed so that they can be dealt with temporarily. If all well tell them we are ready for trial now or later time.

Placing the second sheet of glass over the other to hold the fragments in place, Wilde fastened the edges of the two glasses with adhesive tape and compared the first with the second letter. There could be no doubt, even on a superficial examination, that they were both by the same hand. The detective tapped a pencil to his teeth while he scrutinized them.

‘There’s no doubt that Paddy is up to some mischief,’ he declared, aloud. ‘But I’m not at all sure whether it is going to concern the job I’m on.’

He reached for the telephone and called a number. ‘Is Mr. Silas Longhorn in?’ he asked. ‘Oh, is that you, Mr. Longhorn? I’m Chief Detective Inspector Wilde. May I come along and see you?’

CHAPTER XII

THE CIPHER

THE naturally high forehead of Mr. Silas Longhorn was emphasized because he was entirely and utterly bald. He opened the door himself to Wilde and peered through powerful horn-rimmed glasses at his visitor.

'Oh, it's you, Mr. Wilde!' he exclaimed in a guttural bass. 'Come along in.' He led the way through a darkened passage to a book-lined and littered room, and switched on a light which revealed that his stumpy form was clad in a faded oversize blue dressing-gown, and that he wore carpet slippers. The only tidy spot in the room was a big desk on which a Government dispatch-case lay unopened. 'It's slack times at the Foreign Office these days,' he said as he overturned a bundle of books from a chair to afford his visitor a seat. 'If you've brought me a job of work, it will amuse me.'

Silas Longhorn, C.B.E., like many other men whom Scotland Yard at times calls into consultation, was utterly unknown to the general public. Yet in certain quarters this unobtrusive, bald-headed little man was considered worth his weight in solid gold. His life had been spent in the study of abstruse languages and the scientific elucidation of ciphers. He had no official connection with the

police and would have shuddered at the idea of giving evidence in a criminal trial. In his own particular line he was an expert of experts.

Most detectives have a general acquaintance with all subjects that are likely to arise in the course of a criminal investigation. But few of them will worry about a matter if an expert is to be found through whom they can take a short cut. Wilde knew that the time he might take in slowly and laboriously attempting to discover anything that might lie beneath the surface of the two messages could, from his point of view, be more profitably used. He placed on the desk the double sheet of glass beneath which the torn letter was imprisoned and handed the other to Longhorn.

'I may be just wasting your time,' he apologized. 'These things may mean more or less what they say, but they read so clumsily to me that I want to make sure.'

Longhorn adjusted a shade over his eyes and scrutinized the documents. Thus he remained for some ten minutes. 'I'm afraid this will cost a few hours' work. Will you look in in the morning?' he asked.

'The morning will do,' agreed Wilde, and took his leave.

Early the following day he was at Longhorn's house. The old man was still in his dressing-gown — Wilde decided that he had not been to bed.

'You've given me some trouble,' he said, 'but I am obliged to you for showing me a very entertaining little problem — very entertaining indeed.'

'It is a cipher, then?' asked Wilde.

'Oh, yes. It's a cipher right enough. Quite a well-known type, but difficult to decode if your friend had not been obliging enough to provide us with a key. I was off the scent for a while.'

From the desk, now spread with papers covered with hieroglyphics that bore witness to his industry during the night hours, he picked the letter which had been found under the drawer.

'This,' he said, 'is the message itself. The fragments under the glass simply contain the key. Did you ever hear of Heidelberg's cipher, Mr. Wilde?'

'I can't say that I have.'

'It has the advantage,' explained Longhorn, 'that it cannot be deciphered by the usual methods. On the other hand, once one finds the key it is simple. If you had tackled this yourself, what would you have done?'

'I shouldn't dream of doing so while you were accessible,' retorted Wilde smilingly, 'but if I had been compelled to rely on myself I should first of all have applied the usual tests for sympathetic writing ——'

'There is none,' interpolated Longhorn sharply.

'Then I should have noted how many times the individual letters recurred in the message ——'

'And tested them by the frequency of their order. I know. That is efficacious with certain cryptograms, but not with all. Edgar Allan Poe in "The Gold Bug" applied that means in an ingenious story. By the way, he was wrong in his incidence of the letters in the English language. You would have made a list of all the symbols used and checked them up. The letters *e* and *t* are most commonly used and those least used are *j* and *z*. I'll admit I spent a little time on that line myself. But it soon became obvious that that was wrong. I will ask you to observe one thing about these two messages, Mr. Wilde. There are exactly seventy-one words in each of them. Does that convey anything to you?'

'A word cipher of some sort, probably.'

'You are right. It is a word cipher. Now by Heidel's method it is always necessary to fix on one particular letter as a key. I have spent a lot of time trying to fix that letter. It is *t*. Have a look at these two things and see if that conveys anything to you now.'

Wilde shook his head. The other took up a piece of paper on which the torn messages had been transcribed and underlined certain words with a blue pencil. 'Look at that,' he said.

Wilde read:

Can you send for *the* goods fairly soon. In *the* event of it being impossible *to* make a deal refer matter immediately *to the* chief. Will *take them* at any price *they* nomi-

nate so long as you guarantee *that* no *tricks* are *tried*. All of *them* should be packed so *that they* can be dealt with *temporarily*. If all well *tell them* we are ready for *trial* now or later *time*.

A light dawned on the detective. 'I think I see. These indicate the words in the other message that are to be read.'

'You've hit it.' Longhorn passed another underlined sheet, and Wilde studied it.

Thanks for your good *offices* in our little affair. *No* doubt the thing has taken *longer* than we expected but to be *safe* will try to *arrange* another trip across the *Channel* fairly soon. Let me know what *Jones* thinks *about* it. *C* is a *street* ahead and you can *pick him* for a winner. Put *up* all you can *and watch* closely all the market *movements*. Jones will be *careful*.

He repeated the underlined words aloud:

Offices no longer safe. Will arrange another Channel. Jones about C street. Pick him up and watch movements. Careful.

'I am much obliged to you, Mr. Longhorn,' he said. 'This is going to be useful. I can tell you that the first reference to Jones means myself and that "C street" is Clarges Street.'

'I don't want to know any of your business,' said the old man. 'I've done what you asked me. Don't forget that, if you run across any future messages on similar lines, words beginning with *t* will indicate the words in the accompanying message that are to

be read. Sometimes it is done with one letter of a couple of paragraphs. Good-bye, Mr. Wilde. Always at your service.' He led the way out.

Martin Wilde's satisfaction at the solution of the cipher was tinged with a little disappointment. The message added in small degree to what he had already guessed — that Paddy was acting in collusion and under the direction of the Black Ace. That had now become a certainty. On the other hand, he held the key to the cipher and it might be that other communications of greater value would sooner or later fall into his hands.

In his office he checked the other letters that had been taken from Paddy by the light of the key, but, as he expected, without result. He was studying a little bundle of reports by men who had been engaged on the search at Farringdon Street, when Quenton Thorold was announced. Something had clearly shaken the millionaire out of his usual light-hearted poise.

'See here, Wilde,' he opened, 'I don't mind your making a fatuous ass of yourself so far as I'm concerned. But if you go on annoying Miss Langton, you'll find yourself in a hot corner.'

Wilde eyed him mildly. 'What's the matter with Miss Langton?'

'I won't have her spied on. She can't stir a step without some of your toughs hanging on to her. You may trail me all you want if you still think

that I'm a mad murderer. But you just let her alone.' He banged a clenched fist on the detective's desk. 'I'm patient and I can stand a joke, but there are limits.'

The other made no attempt at denial. 'I'm sorry if our fellows have been as clumsy as all that,' he answered quietly. 'It was a temporary expedient after the events of yesterday. I quite forgot that she was being watched. I'll see that there is no reason for any more complaint.'

Thorold shrugged his shoulders and spoke more calmly. 'I'm glad to see that you're not an absolute congenital fool. I don't want to make myself unpleasant. You can carry on the joke with me as long as you like. I'm pretty sure that you haven't called your people off me, though I haven't quite spotted them yet. All the same I might be tempted to hurt one of them if they become too conspicuous. I'm only here for a short while anyway.'

'Ah. Going back to the States?' queried Wilde.

'I am. If your Black Ace works any more little stunts, you might drop on me again. That would be embarrassing for us both. So in a week or two I sail.'

The detective rose and held out his hand. 'No ill feelings, I hope?' he asked.

Thorold held back for a moment and then laughed as he grasped the extended hand. 'You're a hopeless, incompetent, blundering old ass, Wilde,' he

said, 'but there's something about you I like. If you'd trusted me I might have stayed and got you out of the mess that you're going to drop into.'

The detective also laughed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ALIBI THAT FAILED

IN most criminal investigations there are times when the quest resolves itself into patient and tedious waiting for some false step on the part of the suspects. Martin Wilde felt that he could afford to wait. He rather hoped that the Black Ace would be tempted to another exploit which would in all likelihood open up a fresh line that could be linked with those already in hand. But nothing of that sort happened.

Meanwhile both Stella Cliffe and Paddy were assiduously watched. That they were aware of this Wilde was perfectly sure, for their behaviour was that of people of rectitude who had nothing to fear. There was no person with whom they held communication who was not dubbed suspect until Scotland Yard knew all about them. Many of these were, of course, crooks, but all the activities of the detectives could find no shred of evidence that any one of them was implicated in the activities of the Black Ace.

Following an old detective axiom, Wilde took measures that enabled him to know something of the correspondence received and dispatched by each of them, although this action presented difficulties, for

the Post Office is jealous of the sanctity of its mails in England. After a day or two Wilde deliberately relaxed the constant surveillance, and shadowing was done spasmodically. He hoped that thus one or the other might be lulled to a sense of false confidence.

From Crest, the divisional inspector who had been looking into the burglary at Dutchy Ogle's, he got precise details of the affair. They consulted the files of what Scotland Yard calls the 'M.O. System,' wherein the individual methods of expert criminals are detailed, but this added little to their information.

'I am as sure as that the sun will rise to-morrow,' asserted Crest, 'that this job was pulled off by Paddy. No one else *could* have done it. Yet his alibi is complete — absolutely watertight. We should be laughed out of court if we arrested him.'

Wilde's own opinion was exactly on those lines. His threat to Paddy to look into the matter himself had been no idle one, and, although it meant going again over much of the ground already covered by Crest, he followed it up vigorously.

He went to Liverpool himself and showed photographs at the hotel at which Paddy claimed to have stayed on the night of the burglary. They were identified by several of the hotel servants. There was even a detective sergeant who remembered meeting Paddy accidentally in the hotel lounge and

warning him in a friendly way that, if anything untoward happened in the city, he would be held to account. The hotel register contained the date of Paddy's arrival. Wilde studied the book with some care and then betook himself to the Bridewell and borrowed a file of Supplement A, in which Scotland Yard presents portraits and details of notable rogues who have disappeared from London and may be travelling in the provinces. In a little he had found what he wanted and returned to the hotel.

'Can you remember if this gentleman signed the book himself?' he demanded of the reception clerk.

The man turned the book round to inspect the signature. 'No,' he replied almost immediately. 'The gentleman had sprained his hand and had it in a sling. This is my writing. He asked me to fill in the details.'

Wilde wasted no time in pointing out a technical irregularity. He was anxious to get to a Post Office whence he sent a long telegram to Scotland Yard.

He caught the next train to London and found Crest waiting for him when he alighted some five hours later. 'I don't know what you've found, sir,' said the divisional inspector, 'but I've done what you asked. I have found three people who can swear that Paddy's hand was all right just before the burglary and there are five who noticed nothing wrong with it immediately afterwards.'

'There's just a chance,' explained Wilde. 'It's

thin, but we may make something of it. I've got enough to convince me that the man who was seen in Liverpool was not Paddy, but some one made up to resemble him. The thing is a fake alibi. Paddy's double, whoever he was, dodged signing the hotel book on the plea that his hand was out of action because he feared that his writing might give the game away.'

'That's a bet I overlooked,' confessed Crest ruefully. 'I tested the alibi and when it looked good I gave up hope of roping Paddy. Naturally I relied on the reports from Liverpool.'

'Nobody's to blame,' declared Wilde. 'The man who made the enquiry at the hotel wouldn't think of testing the signature, as there was apparently no doubt. Now, Crest, there are special reasons why I want to get this man. A false alibi is mighty thin to bank on by itself. Is there anything else we can get against him?'

Both these men would have denied with emphatic sincerity any wish to 'railroad' a crook who might be innocent. But in this case neither of them had the shadow of doubt about Paddy, although both were aware how slight the evidence would appear to a jury.

'If we can find the man who masqueraded as Paddy ——?' ventured Crest doubtfully.

Wilde cut him short. 'Not a chance. We have got to get something more hopeful than that. Let's go and have another look over your file.'

In every case handled by the Criminal Investigation Department there accumulates a mass of data — reports, plans, statements — of things which may be relevant. Frequently, in fact, a large proportion of these are entirely irrelevant, for no one can be certain that some seemingly inconsequential trifle may not be of importance as further information is acquired. Wilde had already gone several times over the collection of matter held by Crest, but his mental attitude had been biassed by the belief that Paddy held an impregnable alibi. Now it was different.

He interested himself particularly in a plan of the premises and a minute report compiled by Crest of the condition of the place after the burglary. He laid his finger on a passage in the latter. 'There were several cigarette ends lying about the room. Ogle does not smoke, so that these were evidently left by the robber, who smoked while he worked on the safe.'

'You've got these cigarette ends?' he questioned. 'I'll take some with me. And this thread you mention. Let's have a look at that.'

'The thread was no doubt used for opening the lock of the room door,' observed Crest. 'I've had enquiries made. You can buy that sort of thread anywhere.'

'Never mind. I'll take charge of it. You didn't bother about the cigarettes, I suppose?'

'No,' admitted the other. 'They didn't seem important.'

Among the equipment of many skilled burglars fine soft thread frequently finds a place. There are locks which may be overcome by a patient expert who thrusts moistened threads into a keyhole and adapts them to the tumblers by deft manipulation with a piece of wood. It was one of Paddy's favourite methods, but, as Crest had pointed out, the discovery of the thread was in itself of no help.

During part of the remainder of the day Wilde had interviews with several people, including tobaccoists, paper merchants, an analyst who held a retainer from the Home Office, and the Director of Public Prosecutions.

It was after he left the latter that he made his way to Paddy's flat, accompanied by a couple of men. The three made no attempt to enter, but ranged themselves at inconspicuous strategic points until Paddy appeared and fumbled for his latchkey. He had partly opened the door when Wilde's hand fell on his shoulder.

'I want you, Paddy.'

The burglar wheeled about and the other detective closed in. 'You, Mr. Wilde!' he exclaimed. 'What's the game?'

'Let's go inside and I'll tell you,' said Wilde.

Paddy pushed the door wide. 'You birds make a man's life a misery,' he grumbled. 'Turned the place

upside down the other day. I'd advise you to go easy with me, Mr. Wilde. I won't stand for this all the time.'

'Oh, I've got a warrant,' declared Wilde quietly. 'Come on, Paddy.'

With his arm linked in that of the other, he marched into the little sitting-room of the flat. There he pushed Paddy into an easy-chair and stood over him. 'I am going to arrest you for a burglary at Ogle's place. Anything you say may be used as evidence. Shall I read the warrant?'

'You may use it to light your pipe with,' laughed the other. 'I told you I had nothing to do with that job. Just go ahead. Don't mind me.' He crossed his legs and folded his arms.

'Run him over,' ordered Wilde, and in less than five minutes the prisoner had been effectively searched and a little heap of his personal belongings lay on a table. Wilde picked up a tobacco pouch, opened it, and extracted a packet of cigarette papers. 'Still make your own, I see,' he commented. 'You smoke too much, Paddy.'

'Think so?' said the other indifferently. 'Well, that's my business.'

'Mine, too, I think,' observed Wilde mildly. 'The fellow who did that Dalston job smoked too much. Same kind of tobacco and same paper.'

Paddy's indifference vanished. 'So that's part of the frame-up, is it?' he said. 'I can't help it if other

people smoke the same way as me. You got to have something stronger than that to get me. You try again. If you can get by my alibi, you'll be a darn sight more clever than most bulls.' He sucked his under lip viciously.

'There was thread in the lock at Dalston, too,' went on the detective, as though thinking aloud. 'I wonder if we'll find any thread like that in this place, Paddy. By the way, there's been something the matter with your right hand. Let's have a look at it.'

The other, a little bewildered, held out his hand. Wilde glanced at it. 'Seems all right to me,' he commented. 'What's been the matter with it?'

'What are you driving at?' demanded Paddy, too wily to answer the question directly. He scented a significance in it, although its real point was hidden from him.

'When a man concocts an alibi, he ought to see that there's no holes in it,' replied Wilde. 'You've overplayed your hand, Paddy. You say you were in Liverpool when the burglary took place. We're going to say that you weren't. I shouldn't be surprised if we found the gentleman who did that little bit of masquerading up there, and that may prove awkward for you. Fake alibis are dangerous weapons. You know that I mustn't ask you any questions, but if I were in your fix I've got an idea what I should do.'

Paddy was very white, but he contrived to inflect a derisive note into his voice as he replied. 'You'd squeal, I suppose. Well, you'll burn to a cinder before you ever get me that way. Get on with your knitting. I stand pat. I stick to my alibi.'

'As you like,' said the detective imperturbably.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ESCAPE FROM THE OLD BAILEY

THE proceedings against Paddy were pressed perhaps a fraction more keenly than they might have been in the normal course because of the underlying circumstances of the case. At the Home Office, at the Department of Public Prosecutions, and at Scotland Yard itself, there were a few men — not more than eight or nine all told — who appreciated the importance of showing Paddy that there was no hope of escape. Everything was strictly legal. Neither promise nor threat in words was made to the prisoner. He was subjected to no interrogation and his treatment was neither more nor less than that of a man on remand for a felony. But he was allowed to know that every resource was being bent to his conviction.

Paddy was known to have imagination, and the solitude of a cell, the probability of a conviction, and the certainty in that event of a heavy sentence might, it was hoped, work on his mind and induce him, in the phrase of the police, to 'make a statement' in the hope of softening his fate.

Inevitably the presence of Wilde in the case, together with the fact that one of the ablest of Treasury counsel was briefed to conduct the prosecu-

tion in the police court, gave rise to suspicion in the minds of the newspaper men that Paddy was in some way connected with the murder at the Gnomes Club. But the detective parried all questions with a laugh, and the Press contented themselves with pointing out that the mystery of the murder still remained unsolved while the chief inspector in charge of the case was prominently concerned with a matter of burglary.

‘It can do no harm,’ commented Winter. ‘They’re only guessing and one of the boys might run against something that we’ve overlooked. Besides, it’s all calculated to get on Paddy’s mind.’

In truth there was no certainty among those concerned that Paddy would be convicted. As counsel for the prosecution remarked to Wilde, the evidence was on the thin side and juries were kittle cattle. The alibi might be demolished, but the only direct facts pointing to Paddy were that the cigarette papers and the tobacco were unquestionably similar to those that he had been in the habit of using and that thread found at his flat was like that discovered at the scene of the burglary.

There was scarcely more than the pretence of a fight at the police court proceedings. The astute lawyer for the defence recognized that the longer the trial was delayed, the greater the chance of some piece of evidence turning up that might tell against his client. Such things happen not infre-

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quently, and he was aware that the authorities were straining every nerve. He was not inclined to underestimate the activity of Wilde.

So it came about that only a couple of weeks elapsed after the arrest before Paddy was committed to take his trial at the Old Bailey. The well-oiled wheels of criminal justice permit of little delay in England. A session of the Central Criminal Court was already in being and since there was a light calendar it was merely a question of days ere Paddy took his place in the spacious dock of the main court and glanced about him with an air of supercilious confidence. It was not his first appearance in that arena, but he had always been puzzled why the scarlet-robed judge sat to one side of the great sword of justice rather than immediately beneath it.

His speculations were cut short as the Clerk of Arraignment began to read the indictment with the air of a bored business man in something of a hurry. Paddy's resolute 'Not guilty' had scarcely echoed through the court before a jury was empanelled and the jurors were repeating like children reciting a school lesson the formula of the juror's oath:

'I swear by Almighty God that I will well and truly try the issue joined between our Sovereign Lord the King and the prisoner at the bar, whom I shall have in charge, and a true verdict give, according to the evidence. So help me God.'

The Clerk of Arraignment in quaint age-long language gave the prisoner in charge to the jury, and a little bewigged man rose and in quiet conversational tones began his opening — ‘May it please your lordship, members of the jury ——’

The case was on. Paddy yawned ostentatiously. For all that his mind was keenly alert to everything that was passing and a little frown gathered on his brow as counsel skilfully elaborated his points and stressed the pains that had been taken to manufacture an alibi which the witnesses for the prosecution would be able to demonstrate was false. There followed in swift succession an array of persons who swore that they had seen Paddy in London about the date when he was supposed to have been in Liverpool, and others who declared that he had suffered no injury to his hand. A bitter cross-examination shook some of these, but the majority held to their times and dates. One or two expert witnesses were examined as to the cigarettes and the thread, and Wilde himself was the last to go into the box for the prosecution. His evidence-in-chief was utterly formal.

In even, matter-of-fact tones he related that he had taken the prisoner into custody on a warrant and had directed a search at his flat. Under cross-examination he denied that he had exerted any illegal pressure on Paddy to extort a confession. By itself Wilde’s evidence did not go beyond testimony

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that was so commonplace as to be almost a formula in British criminal courts.

Paddy himself went into the witness-box and detailed a story of a trip to Liverpool. On his journey to that city, he explained, he had hurt his hand in slamming a railway carriage door. A fellow-passenger had bandaged it and put it in a sling, and he intended to have had it looked at by his own doctor on his return to London. The injury, however, had not proved so bad as he had anticipated and he had abandoned the bandage and the sling on his return.

Cross-examination failed to shake him on the details of his movements. The witnesses who declared that they had seen him in London were mistaken. But he was not so steady when questioned about his injury. He did not know the person who had bandaged his hand. He could not call any person who had seen the accident. He had not mentioned it to any one when he got back. The thing was too trivial to stick in his mind.

His alibi was confirmed by a few witnesses from Liverpool, and counsel gave their concluding addresses. The judge summed up and the Treasury Solicitor rubbed his chin doubtfully as the jury retired. 'Touch and go,' he observed in an undertone to Wilde.

Within a quarter of an hour the jury were back. The confused buzz of talk ceased as three knocks

heralded the return of the judge. As the foreman of the jury stood to announce the verdict, every gaze focussed on him. No one paid attention to a man who pushed his way beneath the panelled front to the high dock as though to obtain a better viewpoint.

‘Guilty.’

The judge leaned forward in his seat.

Before he could speak, there came a quick, resolute voice. ‘Stop! Stand back, you people.’

Jammed in the crowd from his place near the solicitors’ benches Wilde could just catch a glimpse of a tall man at the door. A black mask hid the upper portion of his face and in his outstretched hands were a couple of automatic pistols.

The big City policeman who acted as doorkeeper flung himself forward. There was a venomous crack and he rolled forward with a grunt. Behind him another man gave a shrill squeal that might have been caused by either fright or pain. The other door leading to the court was hidden from Wilde’s sight by the dock, but a loud exclamation and a second report from that direction told that that also was well guarded. In the public gallery above the court a third masked man was looking down, also armed with a pair of pistols. The man who had gained the front of the dock was standing on a bench covering the warders who were in charge of the prisoner.

The under-sheriff, a slim figure, with white-frilled

shirt-front and silk knickerbockers, rose quietly from his seat and tried to steal out quietly by the judge's entrance — the only door apparently left unguarded. A pistol swung menacingly in his direction and a stern voice bade him halt.

'No one will be hurt unless we are driven to extremes,' asserted the man who had first spoken, who appeared to be the leader of the group. 'If any one plays the fool — we shall see.' He made a significant gesture with one of his weapons. 'Paddy,' he went on, 'climb over that dock and come here.'

Wilde was not the only man who ground his teeth in impotent rage as the prisoner obeyed. Among the scores of men in court there were many with nerve enough to take desperate risks. But they were for the most part huddled together like sheep, unarmed, and with the knowledge that, before they could reach any one of the bandits, they could be shot down a dozen times. Wherever there was a movement there instantly a sinister muzzle pointed.

The judge alone, his clean-cut face pale, his jaw stern, his eyes glowing with anger at the indignity so suddenly thrust on the chief criminal court of England, rose and pointed a finger at the door. 'Put down those weapons!' he ordered.

A scornful laugh answered him. Paddy dropped to the floor and edged his way to the door. The man who had held up the warders looked upwards. His confederate in the public gallery ostentatiously

brought a pistol to bear on the officers in the dock and the other followed Paddy.

'Better stay where you are, Paddy,' urged Wilde, and his voice was cool and sober. 'This will only get you in worse.'

'Ah, there you are, Wilde,' said the leader. 'I couldn't see you before. Keep your nose out of this.'

He levelled a pistol and on its report the great sword of justice was shivered and a bullet bored its way into the panel behind the bench to which it had been secured.

'Defend the children of the poor
And punish the wrongdoer,'

quoted a mocking voice. 'Good-bye, Wilde. Look after yourself.'

The door opened and closed again. They were gone.

CHAPTER XV

A FLYING SQUAD CHASE

As the marauders disappeared, a dozen determined, angry men — detectives, lawyers, journalists — rushed at each door. But the retreat had been well organized and a couple of shots drove them back. The bandits had rallied in a compact little group and with ready weapons thrust themselves through the loiterers in the corridors and down the big main stairs. Outside in the Old Bailey a large, powerful car was waiting with engine running. They sprang to their places and the car began to move, took the corner into Holborn Viaduct at breakneck speed, and threaded its way westward through the traffic at a pace that promised speedy disaster unless the skill of the driver was reënforced by the favouritism of all the gods of luck.

The precincts of the Central Criminal Court buzzed like a disturbed and angry hive of bees as the success of the audacious enterprise became apparent. Men rushed wildly into the street to gaze vainly in the direction taken by the fugitives. A few detectives and uniformed police chartered taxicabs in the forlorn hope that traffic delays or some accident might enable them to come up with their quarry.

Wilde himself, outwardly composed, had managed to detach a black ace which he had found pinned to the door of the courtroom before it had attracted attention, and, leaving the immediate pursuit to others, was in earnest conversation over the telephone with Winter at Scotland Yard. A City detective officer was in similar communication with his headquarters at the Old Jewry. Both conversations were interrupted as at the farther end of the wires swift instructions were passed on.

The complex machinery of the Metropolitan Police was speeded to meet the unexpected emergency. The fast Flying Squad cars, each hastily filled with armed men, were rushed out to intercept or pick up the trail of the fugitives. Each of these cars was fitted with wireless so that it might be always in touch with Scotland Yard, for, although the occasions for central direction are few, they are of vital importance once in a while.

Within five minutes an 'all-station' message had conveyed the alarm to the two hundred police stations scattered over the seven hundred square miles of London. London police officers of all ranks have an inherent objection to carrying arms as a rule, but in this case the small armouries kept for contingencies were soon emptied of their weapons. Where the stock in the armouries failed, other sources were drawn upon. If a man could not have the latest pattern of automatic pistol, he was pro-

vided with a double-barrelled shotgun, or even with a Morris tube rifle from the miniature ranges.

Little bodies of men were available at all police stations in motor transport of all kinds from the ordinary police tenders to private motor cars hastily borrowed.

Winter issued orders that every man of the Criminal Investigation Department — there were nine hundred of them — was to be armed, and that all other affairs were to be dropped till the fugitives were captured. He was applying the same police principle as that used when two big constables arrest a small drunken man. One is plenty, but two make sure. Wherever the desperadoes were run to bay, there would almost certainly be a fight unless the police could display overwhelming force.

To all the local police forces within a hundred miles of London insistent telephone and telegraph messages were sent urging them to be on the alert for a number of men in a racing car. But the chief hope of the authorities was that the net which had been so quickly and widely spread would enmesh the fugitives before they could get out of London.

Wilde's conversation with Winter had not finished when one of the Flying Squad cars drew up in the Old Bailey. With an abrupt farewell he made a dash for the street. As he jumped aboard the car whirled in the direction taken by the Black Ace and his confederates. It was already known that

they had turned at Hatton Garden, escaping collision with a taxicab and a furniture van by the margin of an inch, and leaving a traffic policeman who had attempted to stop them with a broken leg in the middle of the road. They had wheeled to the left at Clerkenwell Road and in less than half a mile were known to have swerved into some of the by-streets of Bloomsbury. The supposition was that they were trying to break through some of the less congested thoroughfares into one of the main north or west roads.

Hooting wildly, the Flying Squad car dashed in fierce pursuit. A man with earphones over his head was listening intently to the chattering Morse of the wireless from Scotland Yard — experience had shown that this was less liable to interruption than telephonic communication — and now and then scribbled a message on a pad of paper which he handed to Wilde, who directed the driver. Thus for a while they steadily pressed forward, following through a series of streets that roughly paralleled Oxford Street to the north.

But here the wireless directions began to falter. Quick as had been the alarm, it had been outstripped by the fugitives somewhere between Portland Place and Edgware Road. This had been the 'blind spot' of the pursuit. Up to the point where the fugitives' car had crossed Portland Place, it had been remarked for its terrific speed. But none of those who

saw it knew at that moment of the affair at the Old Bailey. The news had not had time to reach the men in the street. So it seemed as if the car had melted into air, although there was still a faint hope that it might be heard of if the flight was being continued. There seemed, however, little chance that that was the case. The probability was that, once the bandits had outdistanced their immediate pursuers, they had slowed down to avoid attention and in all likelihood had abandoned the car, now an obvious source of danger to them, at the first convenient point.

This crossed through Wilde's mind as the Flying Squad car came to a halt. Men, said a message from the Yard, had already been ordered to take up a search among all garages in the vicinity. The district was to be raked clean and other Flying Squad cars had been recalled to be at hand in case of any discovery.

The chief detective inspector did not feel optimistic. The job was one likely to take some time and even if the car were found he did not believe it would help matters immediately. He decided to leave matters for the time and get back to Scotland Yard and have a word with Winter. He held up his hand to a passing taxi.

A passer-by halted and grinned as he jerked his head in greeting. 'So I've fallen in with you again, Wilde,' said Quenton Thorold.

Wilde wheeled abruptly and signalled the cab to go on. 'Think of the devil,' he muttered aloud.

'I appreciate the compliment,' declared Thorold. 'What are you doing down in this direction?'

'A question I was about to put to you,' said the other. His tone was light, but all his suspicions of the American had recurred. It was, to say the least, confoundingly odd that Quenton Thorold should have appeared at that moment at about the spot where the Black Ace had vanished. But Thorold wore a light grey suit and the leader at the Old Bailey had been attired in brown. There was, however, the possibility that a very quick change had been made. A man with the audacity and wit to carry through that afternoon's exploit would be prepared for all contingencies. On the other hand, it was at least equally possible that the encounter was a mere coincidence.

He thrust a hand through the millionaire's arm. 'What have you been doing during the last hour or so?' he demanded.

Thorold raised his eyebrows. 'Ah, I recognize that official tone. You're on the war-path again, my lad. Tomahawk all ready for my scalp. Something gone wrong with the works, eh?'

'You'll see it all in the evening papers soon — if you don't know it already. The Old Bailey has been held up and a prisoner has been helped to escape.'

'You don't say so!' ejaculated Thorold.

Wilde went on. 'The gang got away by car and they have been traced to this neighbourhood. We're searching for them at this moment. I won't beat about the bush. It's darned queer I should meet you here and I want to know something about your movements.'

The millionaire thrust his free hand into a trousers pocket and pursed his lips in a low whistle. 'That Black Ace of yours is a swift worker,' he commented. 'I suppose the prisoner will be Paddy Whatdoyoucallhim. The newspapers hinted that he was mixed up with the Gnomes Club murder. And now you find me almost on the spot. I seem to be unlucky. You'll nab me one of these days, Wilde, if I'm not careful.'

'I'm waiting,' said the other grimly.

'Did you notice the fellow's ear?' giped Thorold gently. 'Oh, I'm sorry. You want my movements. I don't think you'd believe me if I told you. But I think I can satisfy you.' He waved a hand and shouted a summons to an ice-cream vendor who was fiddling with his tricycle fifty yards away on the other side of the road. 'Here he comes. Seems to me he's been playing tag with me ever since I came out for a constitutional. Of course he may be hoping to sell me an ice cream. But he looks to me uncommonly like a C.I.D. man. Had it slipped your mind that you've put some of your best shadows on to

me? I expect he's got a complete diagram and report of everything I've done to-day.'

Wilde bit his lip. 'Have you been keeping this gentleman under observation?' he asked, as the ice-cream man approached.

The man looked doubtfully from one to the other. Thorold laughed. 'Don't be shy, my man. Mr. Wilde is not quite so innocent as he seems. Tell him about our outing.'

Gently disengaging his arm, he strolled away.

CHAPTER XVI

THE YARD BECOMES ANNOYED

BEFORE the day was out they had found the car. Indeed, it almost found itself, for it had been left at a small garage in a turning off the Edgware Road, and the manager had telephoned through to Scotland Yard when he had seen an account of the escape in the evening papers. But it was a barren discovery. The car had been casually left, by two men, like dozens of others in the normal way of business. No particular notice had been taken of the men. They had promised to be back within an hour, but had left no name. The only thing that was certain was that some of the passengers had been dropped before it reached the garage.

Nor did an examination of the car itself help in any degree. It was easy to trace its antecedents. Built originally as a racing model, it had been sold second-hand a week or two before by a firm in Belgravia. A peculiar feature of the purchase had been that the price — several hundred pounds — had been paid in Treasury notes, which cannot be traced like a cheque or Bank of England notes. The buyer, who appeared to be an American, had asked that a car and a driving licence should be procured for him. This had been done and the following day he called for them and drove the car away.

'What name did he give for the licensee?' asked Wilde.

'He called himself Martin Wilde and gave an address at the Regal Hotel.'

The corner of the chief inspector's mouth twitched. He could appreciate the sardonic flavour of the joke. 'That happens to be my name,' he declared drily. 'I'll be obliged if you do not mention that little detail to the newspaper men.'

In fact every precaution seemed to have been taken by the Black Ace. He had overlooked nothing. Not the glimmer of an opening presented itself. Wilde felt that he was battling with some uncanny and elusive being who was playing a game with the power and omniscience of a master. The ordinary crook, however clever he may be, makes here and there some small mistake on which a shrewd and observant man might fasten. Such few errors as the Black Ace had made he covered with illimitable resource.

It is axiomatic among the police of London that a known fugitive never escapes. An unknown man may, but a person marked by Scotland Yard is sooner or later enmeshed in the gigantic police web which covers the country. So far the Black Ace had contrived to show that this rule was not invariable. He had managed to keep Estrehan in hiding. Would he be able to do the same for Paddy?

There was no question in Wilde's mind that every

device at his disposal was being employed to pick up Paddy if he attempted to break out of town. But it had been easier to lock the gates of London before the advent of the motor. The railway station and the docks then alone offered the fugitive a speedy means of exit and they were comparatively simple to watch. But now there were the roads and there were a thousand ways by which vigilance could be brought to naught. He shook his head doubtfully as he climbed the back stairway into Scotland Yard.

Winter was still in his office, and, leaning over his shoulder as he concentrated on a paper lying on his desk, was the tall, lean assistant commissioner, who was the administrative chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. Before Wilde could withdraw, the chief constable called to him.

'Come in, Wilde. This affects you.' He handed over the typewritten sheet which he had been examining. 'This is a circular letter which has been delivered to all the London newspaper offices this evening,' he said. 'It will be published to-morrow morning.'

'Quite cheap typewriting paper,' commented Wilde, testing the sheet between his fingers and holding it to the light to examine the watermark. 'Delivered by hand, of course. There wouldn't be time to mail it.'

'We know all that,' interrupted Winter testily.

'It was sent round by the District Messenger Service. Read it. We're in for a fine time. The newspapers are boiling over.'

Wilde smoothed the sheet out on the desk and read:

To the Editor of the Daily Wire

SIR, — The little affair at the Old Bailey to-day may attract an attention that will probably be directed to only one aspect of the matter. As one of the principals concerned, I am anxious to appeal to the public not to misconstrue the motives that have made it necessary to take so drastic a step.

Those motives have been well known to the authorities at Scotland Yard for some time. A policy of fatuous and futile secrecy has so far operated to prevent them from becoming known. To-day's event was not, as may be supposed, carried through simply in order to save a criminal from punishment. The prisoner, on the face of things, was a common robber. Actually, as Chief Detective Inspector Wilde and his colleagues well know, he was simply an instrument used for carrying out the higher justice — a justice too often obscured by the technicalities of so-called law.

A receiver was fattening on his spoils. The ordinary processes of the law left him immune. I took measures to deprive him of some of those spoils to which he had no shadow of right and to apply them for the good of the world at large. When my agent was about to be condemned, I had a moral right to intervene. I regret that the circumstances made it necessary slightly to injure a couple of innocent persons, but steps will be taken to afford them some financial compensation.

The incident will have value if it brings home to the

public the fact that I have the intention and the means to carry out my purposes to the end whatever it may cost. All those whose minds have not been perverted or blinded by legal sophistries will admit that the rat of the underworld Velvet Grimshaw deserved no mercy. Murraystein, a ruthless bloodsucker, and Markwell, a callous blackmailer, have had a punishment that will save many lives from misery. Thus I have shown that there is at work an organization by which logical punishment will descend upon wrongdoers. Let others beware. In particular let those men who call themselves the emissaries of the law beware how they try to hinder me or terrify those who work with me.

I accept full responsibility for my acts. In every case in which I have been concerned, I have taken care that my direction should be known. Why has Scotland Yard suppressed the fact that I have always marked my work by a memento such as is herewith enclosed?

‘I suppose he sent along an ace of clubs,’ commented Wilde. ‘Mad — completely mad.’

‘Mad or not, he’s holding us up as a gang of incompetent idiots,’ declared Winter. ‘There’s a score or more of journalists waiting out there to hear what we’ve got to say about it.’

‘We’ve got to tell ’em something,’ interposed the assistant commissioner. ‘We daren’t say this letter is a fake. It’s a damned nuisance, Wilde.’

The chief detective inspector felt an atmosphere of covert irritation. Scotland Yard chiefs are only human, and it would be a delicate business to avoid a newspaper outcry that would stir the mandarins

at the Home Office and in Parliament to be unpleasant. Wilde foresaw that if a kick came it was likely to be passed along to him. He caressed his chin meditatively.

‘I’m doing all I can,’ he declared quietly. ‘If you want to pass the job on to some one else ——’

‘Now don’t fly off the handle,’ admonished Winter. ‘No one’s blaming you. We know you’ll get this man. But we don’t know how long it’s going to take. Meanwhile, all the comic men will be raising a laugh at us — at us.’ He jammed a fist savagely on his desk. ‘I wouldn’t give a tinker’s curse what they said in the ordinary way, but this is out of the ordinary. Why, they might even stir up a Parliamentary Committee to sit on the Department.’ He spoke as though of some dire calamity. ‘Can you think of any way to hold off the newspapers until we’ve cleaned up?’

‘You might take a bone from a hungry tiger,’ observed Wilde, ‘but that would be simple to holding a big story from the newspapers. We might persuade them to soften it down a bit. Why not see ’em now?’

The assistant commissioner rose hastily. ‘I’ll be going,’ he said. ‘Better not make it too official.’

His subordinates conferred together for another five minutes and then strolled into the room where the ‘crime merchants’ of the London Press were assembled. Immediately a Babel of questions were shot at them. Wilde flung up his hands laughingly.

‘For the love of Mike, boys, give a fellow a chance. I can’t answer you all at once. No, there isn’t any inside story to this. You know pretty well as much as we do. I’ve only just seen the letter.’

‘Is that letter true?’ demanded one man.

‘I’d hate to take my oath about it,’ said Winter. ‘Still you never know.’

‘Do you mean to say that there’s some person pulling off these stunts just as he likes?’

‘Look here, you boys,’ said Wilde suavely. ‘We’ll hold as little as we can help back from you, but we don’t want all we say published. And what you write doesn’t come from us. Is that clear?’ He paused an instant and, taking silence for assent, went on with an air of complete candour. ‘We have some idea of one or two people who may be at the bottom of this and quite frankly we didn’t expect that they would go so far as they have to-day. The thing was a complete surprise to us. At the same time, it may be the best thing that could have happened. We know they didn’t get out of London, and it may enable us to get at the big men behind Paddy. By the way, we’ve got photographs of Paddy and several interesting little points about him which we’ll give you.’

He gave some details of the chase, and the name and address of the dealer from whom the car had been purchased. ‘You can say that we’re going through the West End of London with a fine-tooth

comb,' he added. 'Directly we get on to anything, we'll let you know.'

A number of embarrassing questions, ranging over the murder and the other incidents in which the Black Ace had been concerned were skillfully parried by both Winter and Wilde. At last some one reverted to the subject of the letter.

Wilde spread his hands and shook his head dubiously. 'You've read it,' he said. 'It may be genuine or it may not be. Whoever wrote it knows something about the case. That isn't to say that he's the head cook and bottle-washer. There may be a little behind it. I'll bet some of you have noticed that it contains one or two raw libels. I can imagine a pretty action for damages coming along when you call men receivers, or blackmailers, or bloodsuckers, merely on the say-so of some anonymous correspondent.'

'You're trying to scare us off,' laughed one journalist. 'You suggest that the letter was written by one of the persons it mentions as part of a scheme to extort money.'

'I suggest nothing,' retorted the detective. 'I don't believe I could scare the papers if I tried. Whoever wrote that letter, it's likely to provoke libel actions if it's published. Suit yourselves. I'll freely admit that, all other things apart, we'd rather you didn't mention it. It's not too complimentary to us.'

Winter laughed as they returned to the sanctuary

of his room. 'You carried that off well, Wilde. They have been told just as much as they'd find out in any case. I believe your hint of libel may do the trick.'

'They'll suppress it as a favour to us,' said the other gravely, but with the suspicion of a twinkle lurking in his deep-set eyes. 'No reputable journal is to be terrorized into silence.'

CHAPTER XVII

STELLA VANISHES AGAIN

QUENTON THOROLD sat with one leg crossed over the other, a foot swinging idly to and fro. Patricia Langton with swift fingers sorted a batch of papers and laid them to one side of her desk.

‘Now,’ she said.

‘Dear lady,’ declared Thorold, ‘I have many things to say.’ He glanced meaningly at the door from beyond which came the clatter of many typewriters. ‘If your excellent staff ——’

‘They won’t interrupt,’ she asserted and pushed a box of cigarettes toward him. ‘I have given instructions.’

His foot stopped swaying and he lit one of the cigarettes. ‘Forgive this caution. I know now how a rabbit feels when it is hunted by a persistent stoat. Outside in the rain — and I hope getting thoroughly soaked — is one of Mr. Martin Wilde’s myrmidons. You’re quite sure that there isn’t a dictaphone in the room — nobody hidden in one of the filing-cabinets?’

She laughed and made a little gesture of denial.

He breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief. ‘Honestly, I’m getting afraid of Wilde. Every step I take is trailed, every bite I eat is watched. I am suspicious

of every one — particularly of waiters and cabmen and newspaper sellers. I've got a notion that my telephone is tapped; and I wouldn't swear that my letters are not read before they reach me. That man Wilde has a suspicious mind. It's hampering me, Pat.'

'And you're thoroughly enjoying yourself,' she retorted crisply. 'You didn't come here to cry on my lap.'

'Don't be so abrupt with me,' he complained. 'Can't you see that I'm thoroughly unnerved — that the strain is telling? I'm not sure that I'm enjoying it so much. Fact is that I told Wilde some time ago that I was going back to the States. I'm a man of my word. I want to clean up.'

'Ah!' She tapped her lips thoughtfully with a small gold pencil and her grey eyes clouded.

He leaned forward and put a hand gently on her knee. 'This is becoming deep water. I'm half-inclined to cut it all out. Why not come back with me, Pat? Let Scotland Yard stew in its own juice. We're not children to keep on playing with fire.'

She twisted the pencil between her fingers and was silent for a few moments. 'No,' she said with sudden decision, 'it can't be done. We can't drop out halfway. Besides, as you say, we're under suspicion.' She smiled down at him. 'I suppose you know that I'm being watched quite as closely as you are.'

Thorold's face stiffened. 'He promised me ...'

Patricia Langton gave a little chuckle. 'Don't be absurd, Quenton. You'll do nothing of the sort. If you meet him, you'll be as sweet to him as — as I am to you. It doesn't hurt me, and a row will do no good. There's nothing at all obtrusive and they're very considerate. Even when they searched this office last night, everything was put back more or less in its place. Let them amuse themselves. My immediate problem is Stella. She's getting restless. Wants to know what has happened to Dick Estrehan.'

'That's simple. You don't know.'

'No, but she believes you do. And she thinks that I can induce you to tell her.'

He helped himself to another cigarette. 'And that's an erroneous notion,' he observed calmly.

'It is a fact that in her way she is crazy about him. I know it is difficult to believe that that stony-hearted little cynic should be hit that way. Maybe it's being idle — plenty of money and nothing to do but think. If she didn't look on the police as her traditional enemies, she would be going to Scotland Yard to-morrow. As it is, she may have a mood sometime and talk to one of the men who are watching her. That would be awkward.'

'It would,' agreed Thorold. 'It would be particularly awkward at this point. What about sending her away — a little trip abroad?'

'But we may want her at any minute.'

'Paris is no distance from London by air.'

'There are two objections to that. She might refuse to go, and if she did go, she might not stay there.'

Before Thorold could reply there was a discreet tap at the door. A girl entered and laid a card before Patricia Langton. She glanced at it and with a smile handed it to Thorold.

'Wilde!' he exclaimed. 'Shall I stay?'

'Please,' she replied. 'It will be a pleasant surprise for him.' And to the girl: 'Send him up.'

The detective inspector bowed gravely as he came into the room. 'Good-morning, Miss Langton. Ah, Mr. Thorold. I heard you were here.'

'The gentleman outside, of course,' said Thorold, with a slight lift of the eyebrows. 'I hope he is not getting wet.'

'Oh, he has found shelter, thank you,' said Wilde.

'Won't you sit down?' asked Patricia. 'What can I do for you?'

Martin Wilde hitched a chair to an angle which afforded an adequate view of both of them and seated himself with deliberation. 'Quite a small matter,' he said. 'It's about Stella Cliffe.'

'Stella,' said Patricia, with calm interest. 'I saw her last night.'

'I know you did,' said the detective. 'You were with her for half an hour — from ten to half-past. That's the reason I have come to you. For, so far as

we know, you were the last person to see her before she disappeared again. She was being watched,' went on the detective. 'A car drew up at her rooms at two this morning. One of my men who intervened was sandbagged, and before the other could get assistance she was spirited away.'

Pat Langton's grey eyes were wide and innocent. 'Amazing,' she declared. 'I'm sorry about your man. Did you want me to do anything about it?'

Wilde watched her carefully. 'You found her before,' he ventured.

'Yes. So I did.'

'Perhaps you could find her again?'

'Perhaps I could.' There was a hint of amusement in her tone. 'But you forget, Mr. Wilde, that at that time I was acting under the auspices of Scotland Yard. Since then circumstances have changed. I — like Mr. Thorold — have come under official suspicion. I confess I should find it a little difficult to double the rôles of the cat and the mouse. So I think I will stick to my typewriting and become a blameless citizen. Of course any information I can give you ——' She made a sweeping gesture with a slim hand.

His eyes met hers dourly. 'You're a clever woman, Miss Langton.'

'Would you put that in writing?' she challenged.

He went on as though he had not been interrupted. 'I'll not deny that there are some odd things

about the pair of you that do not satisfy me. I'm not asking your help. But if you're wise you'll be frank with me and answer my questions. Now, Miss Langton, I want you to tell me the reason for your visit last night and what passed between you and Stella.'

'Wait one minute.' Thorold lifted an impressive finger. 'You've forgotten something, Wilde. Anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used as evidence against you.'

'Be quiet, Quenton,' ordered the woman. 'Let me think. I've taken an interest in Stella ever since I retrieved her for you, Mr. Wilde. I've been to see her and she to see me several times. I had no special reason for calling on her last night. We discussed various ways by which a girl of luxurious habits with a taste for the high colours of life might settle down and become a decent member of society. I regret to say that she took most of my proposals coldly. Her view seemed to be that some wealthy person should die and leave her a fortune, although she had some ideas of winning the Calcutta Sweepstake.'

'Nothing was said that would lead you to believe she contemplated going away?'

'Not a syllable. We discussed hats, and, if I remember rightly, there was some little talk on coloured lingerie — but don't let me bore you, Mr. Wilde.'

'Not in the least,' he assured her, and rose and

reached for his hat. 'I am sorry to have troubled you. I see that you can't help me.'

'Don't misunderstand the lady,' interposed Thorold. 'She could — but she won't.'

'I quite understand,' agreed Wilde. 'Thank you so much. Good-bye.'

She held out a gracious hand. 'Good-bye, Mr. Wilde. I can't tell you how much I am obliged for the discreet way in which you ransacked this place last night. Was it before or after you missed Stella?'

He stared at her blankly. Then a comprehending smile broke on his face. 'I searched this office last night, did I?' He paused with one hand on the door. 'I repeat that you are a clever woman, Miss Langton.'

The door closed. Thorold jingled some coins in his pocket vigorously. 'We've declared open war, Pat. Here's a pretty kettle of fish. I wonder what the devil has happened to Stella?'

CHAPTER XVIII

A DEFIANCE

No one knew better than Stella Cliffe how closely her every action was scrutinized. For that reason she, since her return to London, had behaved with a rigid circumspection with which the most severe Puritan could find no fault, but which was entirely alien to her temperament. Though she had, of course, always been wary of the police, that had in no great degree interfered with her habits or amusements. But she had never before had detectives incessantly upon her heels for weeks on end, and she found the surveillance troublesome. She had that complex contempt of the police detective together with a dread of his luck and cunning which lurks in the breast of most denizens of the underworld.

In her own words, 'they hadn't got a thing on her,' and yet she was afraid. She had been mixed up with Velvet — and Velvet had been murdered. It was all a fairy tale that the police manufactured evidence, that they 'railroaded' people under suspicion for crimes that they had not committed. And yet there were stories she had heard. . . . Suppose she did some incautious thing, something that could be twisted against her. Suppose they set some trap?

Somehow her mind dwelt upon Dick Estrehan. She despised his intelligence, but all the same there

was something about him which she liked. It may have been a mere maternal instinct to protect him from his own folly that possessed her, but she could not rid herself of an anxiety for him. What had become of him? Why didn't she have some word?

The affair at the Old Bailey culminating in the escape of Paddy she had followed with a thrilled interest not unmingled with apprehension. A vague idea was in her mind that it would have some effect upon her own fortunes.

She sat on her bed and tugged viciously at one of her silk stockings. She hated going to bed at eleven o'clock — why, the day had scarcely begun.

'Damn,' she exploded, as her fingers burst through the frail fabric.

Down below a telephone rang, and the girl was still examining the damaged hose when her landlady summoned her to the instrument. With one bare foot thrust into a scarlet slipper she descended.

'Miss Cliffe,' said a voice, and, as she answered in the affirmative, went on: 'Listen; I don't want to mention names, but I'm speaking for some one you know. Can you pack a suitcase and be ready for a car in the next hour or so?'

Stella's nimble wits were instantly on the alert. 'What's the bright idea?' she asked guardedly. 'I'm a respectable girl.'

From the other end of the wire there came an impatient oath. 'I've got no time to argue.'

The girl hesitated an instant before replying. She had no doubt from whom the message came. But she could not make up her mind. Recent events had shown her that she would be playing with fire — and what end had she to gain?

‘Tut, tut!’ she reproved lightly. ‘I want to know what it’s all about. I’m not going gallivanting around in the middle of the night with any gentleman unless I know what it’s for. And’ — her tone rose — ‘neither am I going to be ordered about by anybody from the end of a telephone wire.’

She heard a brief laugh. The voice changed its dictatorial tone. ‘Sorry. That’s all right, Stella. You can return to your virtuous couch if you like. We just thought you’d like to know that Dick was anxious to see you, that’s all. If you don’t care to turn out, let it go.’

Her grip on the receiver tightened. ‘Why didn’t you say so at first?’ she demanded. ‘I’ll come. There’s a pair of Johns hanging about this place. What shall we do about them?’

‘We’ll handle them,’ said the voice. ‘Good-bye. See you later.’

It was nearly two o’clock when Stella was interrupted in the perusal of the adventures of a poor but honest and beautiful factory girl who eluded the wicked machinations of a works manager and ultimately married a duke, by the purring of a car which drew up with engine running outside the house. The

sound of men's voices reached her as suitcase in hand she stole downstairs to the outer door.

By the light of a street lamp as she came out into the street, she had a glimpse of a man running. By the side of a big saloon car another man was bending over a black blur on the pavement. The driver standing on the running-board was speaking to the man in a low tone. Her heart missed a beat. She half-turned back to the house, when the driver saw her.

'Hi! Come on!' he cried, and the other man straightened himself. In three strides he was by her side, had taken her bag, and had her by the arm. 'Here you are. We'll be going. This is going to be no place for us in a minute or two.'

As she shrank back, he used increasing force. 'Don't push me,' she protested. 'I've had enough of this. I'll not be mixed up in it. That man — have you killed him?'

'He's all right. Don't be a little fool. We've only put him to sleep for an hour or two. Hurry!'

Reluctantly she allowed herself to be put into the car. The man sprang in by her side and the driver let in the clutch. Her companion leaned across and pulled down the blinds. 'No reason for us to advertise ourselves,' he said, but Stella knew that the real object of the action was to prevent her seeing the route taken by the car.

'If you've let me in for trouble, I'll get my own

back,' she observed and dabbed her nose with powder. 'I'm not going to be blamed for this rough-house business.'

'We'll take care of that,' said her companion. 'You're safe enough.'

'I've never squealed in my life, but you can carry things too far,' she threatened. 'Where are we going?'

'Don't get inquisitive,' he said. 'You'll see your friend Dick in a little. That's all you're bothering about, isn't it?'

She gave the ghost of a sniff.

When the car drew up there remained on her mind no conception of the length of time the journey had taken. It might have been ten minutes, it might have been half an hour. With her companion she descended into a quiet street of large old-fashioned ugly houses as like each other as peas in a pod.

A heavy door swung open to the touch of a bell-push and Stella was led to a sitting-room at the back of the house. She glanced about the sombrely furnished apartment and made a little grimace of disgust.

'Funny shop, this,' she commented, removing her gloves. 'Where's Dick?'

Through a pair of heavy plush curtains, which concealed an entrance at the other end of the room, a man advanced. He wore a trim pointed grey beard and moustache and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.

'Hello, Stella,' he said. 'Glad you've come. It's fine to see you again.'

The girl stared at him and her face gradually relaxed to a doubtful smile. 'Boy, you had me guessing. Where did you get that chin whisker? It looks as real as if you were Mr. Methusalem himself.'

'It's real, kid,' he assured her. 'I grew it to order, and the colour is dye. Just a precaution the chief thinks wise.'

'I'll leave you to it,' said the man who had brought Stella. 'See you later.'

Stella ran forward as soon as they were alone and, putting both hands on Estrehan's shoulders, looked into his face. 'Take those glasses off,' she commanded, and as he obeyed she bent forward and kissed him. 'You've grown up, old son,' she declared. 'I'll bet you wouldn't fall again for what Velvet and I put across you.'

Gently he pushed her to a chair and sat facing her. 'Yes,' he said thickly, 'I've learnt a lot in a few weeks.'

She crossed her legs, drew out a cigarette, to which she applied a light, and regarded him with narrowed eyes. 'Queer world, ain't it, Dick?' she observed. 'We didn't think we'd meet again like this after the last time, eh? Still want to shoot me?'

He brushed aside the question and gripped both her wrists with unsteady hands. 'How far are you

in this, kid?' he asked in a low voice. 'What do you know about it all?'

The girl disengaged herself and threw a quick look round the room. 'Just about ten times less than you do,' she retorted. 'I was dragged in when Velvet was killed, partly because I thought that you . . . That's why I'm here now. I want to know more. I'm crooked, but I'm not silly. There are things I don't do. I've come because they said you wanted to see me. And now I'm here I'm all for a show-down. Tell me the truth, Dick. Did you have anything to do with croaking Velvet?'

'Good Heavens, no!' he ejaculated. 'He deserved all he got, but I had nothing to do with it. You don't think ——'

'Never mind what I think. Why are you doing this Guy Fawkes stunt? What are you playing at if you're not hiding from the police? You're not a natural-born crook, Dick.'

He gazed gloomily at the floor. 'You ought to know. When — that night — you showed me what a fool I'd been, I left determined to take what seemed the only way out. I met a man — a stranger — who promised to put things right. I was desperate — ready to grasp at a straw and, and ——'

'You fell for it?'

He spread his hands wide. 'What could I do? It was that — or the other thing. Besides, Stella, this is not ordinary crime. This is a — a sort of crusade.

You understand, don't you? I don't mean murder. I keep outside that. But, oh, my dear, it's the only way left to us. We've got to go through with it. We're committed.'

'Not so much of the *we*,' she commanded sharply. 'I'm nobody's fool, and I've done nothing they can touch me for.' She laid a slim forefinger in the palm of her hand. 'Graft is graft and murder is murder. Now that I know you had nothing to do with putting Velvet out, I'm going to cut loose. And that's what I'd advise you to do, Dick. This bloke is crazy. What good will it do you if they get you in the dock at the Old Bailey to tell the jury that you're a crusader? They'll send you down all the same. This kind of talk gives me a pain at the back of the neck.'

The young man slowly shook his head. 'It's easy for you to talk like that,' he answered. 'But I can't. I've got to go on.'

'Can't? Why, what's to hinder us walking right out now?'

A tall masked figure moved silently from behind the curtains and broke into the conversation.

'Forgive me if I interrupt,' he said quietly. 'What is to hinder you?' In the soft tone there was a subtle shade of menace.

Dick shrank as if from a blow, but Stella turned upon the newcomer with a sneer.

'You've been listening in. I hope you've learned something.'

‘Nothing that I might not have guessed, my dear,’ he said. ‘I gather that you’re scared and want to save your skin — at my expense.’

The girl stood up, one hand on her hip, the fingers of the other resting lightly on the table. ‘I’m not scared and you know it,’ she said. ‘You’ve got the Indian sign on Dick, but you can’t hypnotize me. Why should we stand for this cranky kind of dirty work? If you want to risk your own neck, that’s one thing — but it’s another thing again when you drag us in. Little Stella has learned one thing in her life that you don’t know — and that’s when to stop. How long do you think you can keep on with this stuff, even if the police are mutts? Just about five minutes more. We’re clear, anyway. We’re going to beat it while the going’s good. What about it, Dick? Come with me. I can handle this bird with his fancy-dress mask and all.’

She moved across and, putting an arm through that of Estrehan, tried to lead him to the door. The masked man continued to smile.

‘Wait a minute,’ he commanded. ‘You’re a shrewd girl, Stella, but there are a few things you’ve overlooked. Are you sure that you’re so clear? You’d better stick to us.’

The young man looked from one to the other. His face showed an agony of indecision.

‘I hate to dwell on the trifling obligations to me,’ said the stranger in his subdued voice. ‘There’s a

matter of twenty thousand pounds, for instance — quite apart from various sums you have both had from me. You're a crooked crook, Stella. You don't pay your debts. I do — to my friends and my enemies. Dick must remember that the police are looking for him — and I'm the only man who can save him. Let's finish this. There's more money than either of you have dreamed of if you stick by me. On the other hand, there are years and years in gaol.'

The girl seemed not to have heard him. Her hand was on the door. 'Are you coming, Dick?' she asked.

With sudden decision he sprang after her. 'Yes,' he cried and, hand in hand, they passed into a darkened passage.

Something was pressed heavily against Stella Cliffe's face and she gave a stifled shriek. As Dick Estrehan turned, a sack was thrown over his head and a pair of handcuffs pressed on his wrists. They were led back to the room they had just quitted.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOUSE AT CANONBURY

It would be pleasing to relate how Martin Wilde, by the examination of a motor-tyre print outside Stella Cliffe's apartments, traced her to the end of her excursion. This would have been one of those spectacular touches useful to the writer of detective fiction. But the inexorable demands of veracity are not to be avoided. There were no distinguishable tyre marks, nor would the chief inspector have wasted much time in examining them if there had been. But the number as well as the description of the car had been noted by his men, and this prosaic fact offered an opportunity on which he was quick to fasten.

Hard on the heels of his information, messages were speeded over the wires to the two hundred police stations of London. There was, of course, the possibility that the number had been swiftly changed once the car was away, but its appearance could scarcely have been altered. There was also the chance that it had not been noticed other than as a vehicle on its lawful occasions, but there is little traffic in the London streets in the small hours and since motor burglary became a profession the police are observant. The odds were even that it had been noticed. So that morning, as ten thousand policemen signed off duty, they were questioned.

Now it chanced that a constable patrolling in the dull thoroughfares of Canonbury had felt monotony press hard upon him. Five minutes after he had met his section sergeant, he withdrew to the shelter of a secluded doorway and lit a surreptitious pipe. Since this is a breach of discipline severely frowned on by the authorities, and since one could never be certain that a zealous section sergeant might not unexpectedly return, his vigilance was stimulated beyond the normal.

Thus it was that, unobserved himself, he saw a car draw up at one of the neighbouring houses. A woman and a man carrying a suitcase alighted and passed into one of the buildings. The car drove off and with a sigh of relief the constable took the palm of his hand from the top of his pipe and finished his interrupted smoke. There was nothing to arouse his suspicion. Evidently a pair of belated wayfarers had just arrived home. But for his trifling infraction of the rules of the service, the incident would have made no impression on his mind, nor would he have remembered the number of the car.

As it was, he was conscious of a glow of satisfaction when he was complimented on his observation and his memory in the morning. He did not trouble to mention the pipe. On such trifles do promotions hang.

The news did not reach Martin Wilde till after his visit to Miss Langton. His lips tightened as he con-

sidered it. Things seemed to be coming his way at last. But he was a cautious man, and he knew this was one of those cases in which hasty action might defeat his purposes.

Winter, to whom he sketched his ideas, agreed with him. There was no doubt that the girl who had been seen by the constable was Stella. The probability but not the certainty was that the house was a retreat of some of the principals of the gang for whom he was searching. The point was to entrap as many of them as possible. But several hours had elapsed and it might be that all of them were no longer within the house. They would have no indication that their whereabouts had been discovered and would have no special reason for keeping rigidly within doors. But even criminals have to sleep, and, if the house was being constantly used, it was reasonably sure that they would be there at night. The problem was not a new one for Scotland Yard, where it is almost axiomatic that the best time to catch a criminal is when he is literally asleep.

Wilde felt that it was policy to wait. Nevertheless, he took one or two steps.

Four of the brightest young men at the Yard were detailed for a trip to Canonbury. Two of these were provided with the habit and equipment of window-cleaners. A great deal may be seen while a man is cleaning an upper window. It was their mission to find the amenable occupant of some house

which would afford a point of observation, and in whom they might, to some extent, confide. Now that the Black Ace and his confederates had been located, Wilde proposed that a constant observation should be kept. The slight risk of indiscretion had to be taken, for he could devise no other means by which an inconspicuous point of vantage could be obtained.

The other two men, it was decided, should be hawkers. They were merely scouts to obtain information which would give Wilde rough data for his plans. Besides getting topographical details of the neighbourhood, they were to glean anything they could of the appearance and habits of those persons who frequented the suspected house. On all of these emissaries Wilde impressed the necessity for the strictest caution.

But in spite of these steps Wilde was no nearer to discovering who was in the house when at twelve o'clock that night he stepped from his car at a point of rendezvous half a mile away. It was with some uneasiness that he learned that no one had been seen to enter or leave that day. He did not believe that any hint of his purpose had leaked out. Yet, if his men were right, there had been no sign of life about the place. It was queer.

By various ways thirty armed detectives had drawn a cordon out of sight of the house. Wilde made a circuit and at his word the cordon began al-

most insensibly to contract. A passer-by would have seen little to attract attention — possibly a man or a couple of men sauntering quietly through the by-streets. Wilde had studied his tactics carefully. If his directions were obeyed, there would be no bolt-hole left unguarded.

Accompanied by two men, he made his way to the front door of the house while the rest of his little force closed in. The chatter of an electric bell was distinctly audible as he pressed the button and waited crouched closely against the outside wall. It was not impossible that those within were on the alert and that the answer would take the form of a pistol shot. Again he rang and reënforced his summons with the thud of a heavy knocker. Dead silence followed.

Wilde whispered a word to his two companions and moved to a side window. There was no need for finesse. With the butt of an automatic he crashed a pane of glass, and, jerking aside a curtain that obstructed his view, thrust an arm within. A ray of light from his torch jerked about the room.

‘Nothing here,’ he muttered, and, springing the catch, flung up the window and, pulling himself over the sill, dropped into the room. The others were hard at his heels.

The inspector found and turned on the electric light switch. They were in a dining-room furnished in a heavy Victorian manner. Dull oil paintings in

tarnished gilt frames looked down on stiff mahogany furniture. On the table and on the cumbrous side-board bowls of flowers lightened the sombre aspect of the room.

‘These flowers are nearly fresh,’ declared the inspector. ‘Come on, lads.’

He plunged into the passage and, switching on the lights as he went, began a swift examination of the house. A puzzled frown grew on his forehead as he progressed. The place bore none of those signs which might have been expected had it been hastily abandoned. Every room was in apple-pie order, beds made, floors swept, fires laid. It was as though those who had occupied it expected to be back at any minute.

‘Darn funny,’ observed Wilde, back on the ground floor once more. ‘I suppose there’s a cellar. Let’s have a look at it.’

A locked door beneath the stairway was evidently the entrance. A young detective shook the handle impatiently and, at a word from the inspector, flung his full weight on the panels. The flimsy lock gave way and he fell headlong. At the same instant there was the startling report of a revolver, rendered doubly loud by the confined space in which it was fired.

Wilde, pistol in hand, dropped on his face and threw the glow of his torch down the flight of steps leading to the cellar. No second shot followed. At

the bottom of the steps a man was getting to his feet.

'Are you hurt?' demanded the inspector.

'Nothing but a few bruises,' replied a cheerful voice. 'Throw that light about, sir. I've still got my gun, and I'd like to have a go at the bird who tried to pot me.'

Wilde obeyed, and, as the light illumined the vicinity of the steps, rose to his feet with a laugh. The beam of the torch was focussed on a pistol, fixed level with the door, and from the latter there led a length of string which gave plain indication of what had happened. The mere act of opening the door would fire the pistol. The inspector detached the string from the door.

'A booby trap,' he commented. 'Lucky for you that you took that tumble or you'd have been dead as mutton.'

With some little difficulty he succeeded in retrieving the pistol, and, after a cursory examination, dropped it in his pocket. Then he proceeded with the interrupted inspection of the cellar.

This was unusually spacious, stretching to the full extent of the house. One small portion was devoted to the storage of coals, and another had been partitioned off for use as a wine-cellar. The remainder of the space was much taken up with house lumber of various kinds. Among this the detectives rummaged, scarcely expectant that any result would now attend their labours.

It was while thus engaged that one officer threw aside the topmost of what was apparently a heap of sacks. His cry brought Wilde quickly to his side. Lying side by side, helplessly tied with cord and gagged with handkerchiefs, were Stella Cliffe and Dick Estrehan.

CHAPTER XX

STELLA'S STORY

ESTREHAN was no sooner freed than he slumped into a dead faint. Stella was made of sterner stuff. She giggled hysterically as Wilde lifted her to her feet and clung to him feebly.

'Gosh, but I never thought that I'd ever be glad to see you, Mr. Wilde. You're as welcome as flowers in May. Excuse me hanging on to you. I can't stand properly.'

'That's all right. We'll have a doctor for you in a jiffy,' he said. 'Hold tight.' He stooped and, lifting her in his arms, carried her up from the cellar and laid her on a couch in one of the reception rooms. The unconscious Estrehan, whose identity had been revealed by a little scrutiny, was brought up by others and placed in one of the bedrooms. Wilde had his reasons for keeping the two apart for a while.

He sent for the divisional surgeon and the matron from the local police station and, after giving a few other directions, sat down on a chair by Stella's side and filled his pipe. His face relaxed as he smoked silently and thoughtfully. The Black Ace had eluded him, but the case had advanced another stage. There is no axiom more true than that when thieves fall out honest men come by their own. It

was evident that there had been some serious disagreement between the leader and his satellites — an event for which Wilde had long hoped. Stella and her companion might be in a mood to talk — in the Scotland Yard sense — as soon as their physical condition had been restored. He believed that it would not now be a difficult task to persuade them to say what they knew.

The girl lay with closed eyes and half-parted lips as if she had fallen into an innocent sleep. Wilde reflected grimly that many people viewing her thus would have found it hard to believe that she was a professional criminal. She looked as void of guile as a flower.

Her blue eyes opened languidly. 'Waiting for li'l Stella to get good and ready to squeal, eh? Perhaps you got another guess coming.'

The detective only saved his pipe from dropping by an instinctive tightening of the teeth, and jerked it back abruptly. While he imagined her to be asleep, she had been diagnosing his thoughts. He laughed, partly at himself.

'Don't you worry about me,' he said. 'You lie quiet until the doctor comes. We'll go into things then.'

She dropped an eyelid in a knowing wink, but before she could reply the sound of a doorbell announced the arrival of the doctor and Wilde withdrew while an examination took place. He was

waiting when the doctor had finished his ministrations and they exchanged a few words.

'The man is completely exhausted,' reported the divisional surgeon. 'He seems to have been under a severe mental as well as a physical strain. He may be all right to-morrow — or he may not. I'd advise you to have him sent to a hospital for the time being. The girl has stood it better. Twelve hours' rest will put her right. I've given her a stiff glass of brandy and she's recovered wonderfully.'

The chief inspector nodded. 'It's important that I should question one or the other as soon as possible,' he commented. 'Every minute may make a difference. Would it do any harm if I had a talk with the girl?'

The doctor scratched his chin doubtfully. 'I should certainly leave the man alone for a while. If you must do it, see the girl.'

'Thank you,' said Wilde, and, with a slight tap on the door, went in to Stella. The police matron he dismissed with a word of thanks and drew up a chair by the side of the girl.

She regarded him with a faint flush on her cheeks and with a wry face sipped at a tumbler of brandy. 'Horrid stuff,' she commented. 'You come back for this third-degree stuff?'

He adjusted a cushion so that she could recline more easily. 'The doctor says you'll be all right soon, Stella,' he remarked. 'I shouldn't worry you now,

but there are just one or two things I want to know quickly. You needn't answer unless you like, but I'm putting it to you that it's not you I'm after in particular. Of course,' he qualified, 'if you've had a hand in some things, I can't help myself, but you can reckon I'll do my best for you.'

'Old stuff,' she interjected contemptuously.

'Well, believe it or not, I've got a friendly feeling for you, Stella. I'm not going to take a formal statement now. What you say is just between us two. I know of no reason why you shouldn't come clean if you're not in this mess. How long had you been downstairs when we found you?'

She affected to think. 'Put it down at a million years more or less.'

'Don't fence. It can't hurt you to answer that question. We know what time you got here. How long after that was it that they parcelled you up?'

'No, there's no harm in telling you that,' she said slowly. 'It may have been a couple of hours.'

He whistled softly. 'Good Lord! Over twenty-one hours. Poor kid! You must have the vitality of an eel. Who had a hand in it? Why did they do it?'

Her lips tightened stubbornly and she shook her head. 'Damifiknow. Just a little amusement for 'em.'

For a brief second he hesitated. He knew something of Stella's type. Some strong motive clearly underlay her determined refusal to speak. However

strong her loyalty to her associates, it would ordinarily have been shattered by the manner in which she had been so recently treated by some of them. He changed his tactics.

'It's a pity you hang on to this attitude, Stella. You know well enough that we're bound to get to the bottom of this business. And when we do it will be all the worse for you — and for Dick Estrehan.'

Watching her intently, he saw that the shot had told. The faint flush faded from her cheek. 'Dick,' she repeated. 'What are you doing about him? How is he?'

The inspector had shifted his gaze. He was apparently interested in a picture on the opposite wall. 'He's not too good,' he said gravely. 'If you want to do him a good turn, you'll give me everything.'

The girl pondered for a matter of seconds. 'If I put you on a line,' she said, 'will you give me your word of honour that you'll see he gets a square deal?'

'If you tell the truth,' he answered, 'I'll do what I can to make things as easy as possible. I give you my solemn word on that.'

His air of real sincerity made its impression on her. There was no great sympathy in his mind either with Stella or with Dick. The one was simply a professional crook, the other a weak man enmeshed in a net of circumstance. He would have seen either sent to penal servitude without a twinge. But as it was they were only pawns in the bigger game. To bend

them to his purposes, he might contrive to soften the asperity of the law. If any loophole presented itself, he would fulfil his word to Stella by taking advantage of it. The form of a charge would depend largely upon him. His word would carry weight with a judge in passing sentence. His chief concern was to find some means by which the main actor in the drama could be run down. To that end he was prepared to go farther than he otherwise would have done.

‘Give me a cigarette,’ said Stella. ‘I can’t talk without one.’

Although a confirmed pipe-smoker, Wilde always carried a packet of cheap cigarettes. They came in handily on many occasions as one of those little touches of courtesy that have sometimes an important effect. He passed over the packet and gave her a light. ‘Start with the murder of Velvet,’ he said. ‘How did you manage that getaway? Who was the other woman?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, that was the beginning. You remember that I fainted. When I came to, I found a lady with me. She dismissed the attendant and asked me if I was strong enough to walk. She explained that she was a friend and that, if I didn’t want to be mixed up in a dirty murder business, she would help me. I was still thinking that — that a friend of mine might be suspected, and I certainly wasn’t anxious to go in the witness box. So, after a little confab, I agreed. That woman was a wonder.

She just showed a card to the guys on the door and we walked out with our heads in the air. It was like eating pie.'

'H'm,' commented the detective. 'You haven't mentioned the lady's name.'

'No. She never mentioned it,' said Stella steadily.

'You'd know her again?'

'I might. I can't say.'

The man leaned forward a little. 'Was it by any chance Miss Langton?' he demanded.

Her blue eyes met his deliberately. 'No, it was certainly not Miss Langton,' she declared.

He gave a grunt deep in his throat. 'All right. Go on. Where did she take you?'

'We just walked to Piccadilly Circus,' went on Stella, 'and there she telephoned to some one. Then we took the tube to Baker Street. Outside the station a big car was waiting. We got in.'

'One moment,' he interrupted. 'Who was driving the car?'

'A man. I didn't notice much about him except that he was dressed in chauffeur's uniform. She said a few words to him which I didn't hear and he went off. She took the wheel of the car and I sat beside her. We didn't start off at once. It was the first chance we'd had for any private conversation since we left the club. She asked me a few questions. She knew quite a lot about me, though I can't guess where she got it from. Things I thought nobody

knew. Among other matters she asked where I was born. When I told her that my parents were village folk and still imagined that I was an innocent shop-girl and that my real name was Grebb, she declared that the last place Scotland Yard would think of looking for me would be with them in Surrey.'

'She was right there,' remarked Wilde.

'So we motored down,' continued the girl. 'I was to explain that I had been given an unexpected holiday. She gave me fifty pounds in Treasury notes and said that, if I was a good girl and did what I was told, she would make my fortune. Of course, I don't believe all I hear, but the fifty quid was real enough, anyway. I was not to leave the farm without instructions, but in the event of being traced I was to communicate with one of her friends whose telephone number she gave me. She came down to the farm once or twice, and I put her wise to one or two people — mostly grafters — she wanted to know about. I concluded she was mixed up in some big piece of graft and wanted help. I will say she was pretty free with her money for anything I did for her. I was to come back to London to have a corner in the job as soon as things had blown over.'

'Did she give you the names of any of her associates?' asked Wilde.

The girl gave a gesture of denial. 'Not a name — except Dick's. I understood that he'd been dragged into it, although I didn't quite know how. But I

knew there were other people, because she said that if any one showed me a playing-card — a black ace — I would know they were acting on behalf of a man she called the chief. The thing looked good to me because it was easy money. Then Miss Langton found me, although how she worked out where I was was a mystery to me.'

'You had never met her before?'

'I didn't know her from Adam then. She rushed me off my feet and I agreed to go back to town to see you. You see, I knew that if I refused you'd be along, anyway.'

'Did you see the other woman at all after you came back to London?'

'Not a sign of her. She probably knew how closely you were keeping tabs on me.'

She shot a demure glance at him from under her long eyelashes. 'I guessed you'd have me trailed. So I strolled about town and did a little shopping until I'd tired your lads out, and then I rang up the number the lady had given me and reported in a code as we'd arranged.'

Wilde did not remove the impression that she had thrown off her shadowers. 'Then you went to your old rooms,' he said, 'and you've remained there since. How did you manage to keep in touch with your friends?'

She chuckled. 'Funny you smart fellows overlooked one little bet. You watched me every time I

went out. You arranged with the postman to look at the postmarks of my letters — and I shouldn't be surprised if you looked inside most of them. But you never thought of tapping my landlady's telephone.'

The detective smiled. 'Perhaps we didn't. Then you didn't see any of these people in person.'

'Well,' she drawled slowly, 'I might have done in a way, but not as you would call it officially. They didn't guess I was wise to them. Wouldn't it strike you as funny now if you got a bunch of Treasury notes every week by post, always without any other enclosure, and always in a plain envelope post-marked from a different place each time?'

'I knew that,' he remarked. 'Didn't you rather expect them?'

'Yes. But what I didn't expect was to have some one else handing me out money for no reason that I know of.'

Wilde raised his eyebrows. 'Miss Langton?' he said mildly.

'I rather thought you'd guess it. She's a slap-up lady and I wouldn't have a word to say against her if it wasn't for what her pals did to me and Dick in this place. But I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Wilde. She more than once brought a bird named Quenton Thorold to see me — probably your fellows reported that to you. But what I want to know is what they'd be paying money to me for? What have I done for them? And, believe me, they know a lot about this

game — more than I do. They were always talking about my plans — trying to dig out of me whether I was likely to squeal, I guess. They never talked straight business, and they always side-stepped me when I asked straight questions, but they went on a lot about my feelings to Dick and whether I wanted to marry him. Perhaps I talked a little freely. Y'see I thought they were straight crooks and again I had an idea that I hadn't treated Dick quite right. But they fenced whenever I pressed them about him. That began to annoy me a little. I let 'em see that I'd stand for just so much and no more. I kind of hinted I might talk to you. Really, I didn't mean to do anything like that, but I was getting fed-up.

'Then, last night, after Miss Langton had gone, somebody rang me up and said Dick wanted to see me. I fell for it. They sent a car and brought me here. I saw Dick and tried to persuade him to cut loose from the whole thing. He told me he'd had nothing to do with the murder of Velvet, and I got him to agree at last. It was a frame-up. The Black Ace was listening to everything we said and he broke in. We started to make a getaway when some of the gang jumped us and brought us back. Dick said a few words to some of 'em — and perhaps I chipped in once or twice. After a while we were locked up in separate rooms while they had a pow-wow about us. Then we were brought down again and asked to promise to carry on with them. But I was awake.

The gag was to get us in so deep that we couldn't back out. It wasn't good enough — not with that tough crowd — though Dick might have weakened if I hadn't been there. They wouldn't have dared lose sight of us whatever we promised, anyway. So we were tied up and carried to the cellar, where you found us. Perhaps they thought we'd peg out. Perhaps they intended to scare us. That's all I know.'

'You had a good look at this fellow — the chief?' said Wilde. 'Did you happen to recognize him?'

'Well,' she said, with quiet deliberation, 'if Quenton Thorold was to put a little grease paint on his face and change the colour of his hair, it might have been him.'

CHAPTER XXI

ESTREHAN DISAPPOINTS

AFTER something less than six hours' rest, Wilde arrived at Scotland Yard to take stock of the results of the raid. With philosophy he reflected that, although he had missed the big fish, the effort had not been altogether vain. At least he had achieved a tactical victory in gaining possession of Stella and Dick Estrehan, both of whom were likely to be important actors in the final stages of the case.

Stella he had put for the time being under the charge of one of the two women detective inspectors from the Yard, a tactful and shrewd woman who could be relied upon to make no mistakes in handling her. Two armed detectives were warned to be always within reach of the women, for Wilde had formed a high opinion of the audacity and enterprise of the Black Ace and his associates and was in no mind to run the risk of losing the girl again. Estrehan had been sent to a private ward in one of the big public hospitals, also under the surveillance of two armed men. One never knew what might happen.

The methodical activities of the police at Canonbury had occupied much time. A detailed search of the house had revealed nothing fresh. That the

chief inspector had anticipated. If, as seemed apparent, the intention to raid the house had become known, the members of so astute a gang would have been very careful. Enquiries had shown that the house had been rented furnished from a firm of estate agents by a man who called himself Smith and who was apparently an American. A considerable sum had been paid in advance, as the tenant said that he was a newcomer to England and could give no personal references. Even forged references might have left some trace.

In conference with Winter and the area detective superintendent, Wilde admitted that the point which chiefly puzzled him was why Stella and Dick should have been left behind. 'If they knew we were coming,' he asked, 'why should they have left these people, who know quite a lot, for us to find? Why not have carted them away? Or why not have put them completely out of the way? If a man's likely to be hanged for murder, it's not reasonable that he should hesitate at one or two more to make himself safe.'

'They were hurried,' suggested the area superintendent. 'It was too much trouble and risk to carry away two unwilling people.'

'That doesn't explain why they left them to fall into my hands — alive,' said Wilde.

Winter emphasized a point with a heavy forefinger. 'Seems to me you're overlooking something.

This booby trap on the cellar stairs. That was just plain futility if it was meant for indiscriminate murder. What good would it have done them if they had killed one of our boys? This Black Ace fellow may be mad, but there's always been some motive behind the most crazy of his acts. If I were making a guess, I'd say that they thought it possible a raid might be made, but they weren't sure. That pistol wasn't intended to kill, or perhaps they didn't care whether it did or not. It was meant as a warning to some one.'

'You think some one was hanging about to hear if we made any search of the cellar?' said Wilde.

'That's my idea,' said the chief constable. 'What have you done with the gun?'

'Sent it along to an expert for examination,' explained Wilde. 'We may be able to trace where it was bought and who bought it.'

'Well, guessing won't help us much until we've got more facts,' said Winter. 'You'll be getting a statement from this boy Estrehan, of course. What move have you got in your mind after that?'

'Perhaps I had better have a word with the Director,' said Wilde. Only one person is meant when the 'Director' is referred to in the Criminal Investigation Department — the Director of Public Prosecutions. 'If I get what I expect from Dick Estrehan,' he went on thoughtfully, 'I may be in a position to make an arrest. Estrehan, at least, should be able to swear to identity.'

Winter's brow contracted. 'You mean Thorold. I'll own it looks nasty against him, but I'm not at all easy. All the positive evidence you will have will be that of these two young crooks and they'll be jolted up in cross-examination. Why, you saw this man yourself in Farringdon Street, and if you are right, he's got a resemblance to Thorold, but they are definitely different people. We can't afford to go off at half-cock.'

'That's why I wanted to talk with the Director,' explained Wilde. 'As for the man I saw, he was not Thorold, although I at first thought he was. But because there is a man in the gang who is like Thorold, there is no reason why Thorold, himself, should not be in the game. The thing may be intentional.'

The conversation turned to legal technicalities and, after a while, Wilde departed to take up the active threads of the investigation.

He found Dick Estrehan in the hospital, propped up with pillows, and playing cards with his guardians. The game was peremptorily broken up and the chief inspector seated himself by the bedside with a genial word. 'Well, old fellow, you look a little less limp than when I saw you last. How are you feeling now?'

Estrehan eyed him with something of the uneasy trepidation of a caged animal. 'I'm better, thank you,' he answered mechanically.

‘That’s all right, then. I thought I’d like a little talk with you. Stella sent her love.’

A faint tinge of colour showed in the pale cheek of the other. ‘These men’ — he waved a hand to the door through which Wilde’s subordinates had disappeared — ‘they won’t answer any questions. Am I under arrest?’

Wilde caressed his chin with one hand. ‘I shouldn’t exactly put it that way,’ he said. ‘We’re just detaining you for a while. We have to in the circumstances, you understand. Stella has told me one or two things and I gather you have been badly let in. We all make fools of ourselves sometimes. I’m inclined to do what I can for you, but it may be that there will have to be some sort of charge against you. I tell you that frankly. So don’t answer any questions unless you like.’

The young man breathed heavily. ‘I can’t make it any worse,’ he said, after a pause. ‘I’ll be glad to be done with it.’

Wilde knew enough to frame his questions adroitly and with an air of candid sympathy that encouraged Estrehan to expand with the feeble self-justification of a weak man on the manner in which the fates had conspired against him. He began with that hour of desperation when he had faced Stella across the dinner table with a realization of the full extent of his folly.

‘What could I do, Mr. Wilde?’ he demanded. ‘I

didn't mean to steal the money, but it was gone, and when they discovered the loss I knew I should be blamed. I was dazed when I left her — ready for anything that would save the disgrace. . . . Then this stranger offered to put things right. I don't know that I believed him, but I was ready to grasp at any straw. That's how I got mixed up with these people.'

'Yes, you were in a bad fix,' admitted Wilde. 'This fellow who you say doped you — he was the one you had most to do with. You didn't recognize him by any chance? Did he remind you of any one you'd ever seen at the office? I'm trying to work out how it was that he knew you were up against it.'

'No. I don't remember that I ever saw him before. How he knew so much is a mystery to me.'

'Can you remember where you were sitting in the restaurant?'

Estrehan shook his head, and the detective let the point pass. The young man dwelt on his adventures at the Farringdon Street office. 'I was frightened by this man. I had to agree to do what he said. Besides, he was so plausible. He explained that it was not real crime.'

Wilde made a little grimace. 'When I was at Farringdon Street,' he said, 'you must have realized that it was a little more serious than play-acting.'

If you hadn't interfered, perhaps all this business might have been over by now.'

'I'm sorry,' faltered the other. 'I didn't know who you were.'

'If you had, perhaps you would have killed me,' smiled the detective. 'Never mind about that. I can guess what your state of mind was. Now tell me what you did in the office while you were there.'

It quickly became clear, as Wilde had all along suspected, that the young man had been used as a blind instrument who knew nothing of the ultimate ends of the conspirators. He had evidently been outside their confidence and had simply carried out mechanical instructions. When Wilde had been knocked out, the Black Ace had coolly brushed himself down and then led Estrehan to the street, where they had picked up a cab and driven to Canonbury. They had stopped once on the way and Dick had waited while his companion telephoned.

Once within the house at Canonbury, Estrehan had been warned that he must in no case leave it, and his own fears were sufficient to ensure that he rigidly carried out the injunction. He had been provided with glasses and been instructed to let his beard grow. By some method this and his hair had been bleached to give him an appearance of age.

'Did this man live in the house?' asked Wilde.

'No. I was apparently the only permanent occupant. A charwoman used to come once in a while

to clear up, but I don't know who gave her instructions. Mr. Nemo came now and again and sometimes stopped a night. There were two or three other men who often met him there, and sometimes they stayed. Nothing was certain. I never knew when any one was coming or going.'

'There was no other woman beyond this cleaner?'

'I never saw one.'

'How did you manage about food?'

'The tradesmen called every morning, and when the charwoman wasn't there, I used to mug up a meal. There was always plenty of canned stuff.'

'Who did the tradesmen think you were?'

'I was supposed to be an eccentric old gentleman in delicate health. I didn't speak much to them except to give orders.'

Wilde switched to another line. 'These other men you were seeing from day to day. What were their names? What were they like?'

'No names were ever mentioned except Christian names.' Estrehan added vague descriptions which the detective mentally catalogued as of no value. Observation was evidently not one of the young man's strong points.

'They talked with you and before you, I suppose. Did you ever get any inkling of their ultimate intentions?'

Estrehan fidgeted with the bedclothes. 'They always talked generally. As a rule I could only form

a vague idea that something was being worked out. I don't think these men knew a great deal themselves. The chief, I believe, would give instructions at the last moment.'

But the closest questioning failed to shake Dick's story. He frankly admitted that he suspected some big scheme was being planned before Paddy had been carried off from the Old Bailey, but he had only realized the significance of what he had heard when he read the papers the day after the escape. So far as he knew, he had never seen Paddy. He was certain that the gang had some other rendezvous than the Canonbury house, but he had no idea where it was. His account of the events which had led to the break with the Black Ace corresponded closely with that of Stella.

Wilde had to confess to himself that the result of the interview had not corresponded with his hopes. He rose to take his leave.

'I'll send a man to show you some photographs,' he said. 'You may recognize one of the gentlemen who were at Canonbury. And I'm told that tomorrow you'll be fit to get about. I shall want to take you to have a quiet look at a man you may know.'

CHAPTER XXII

MARTIN WILDE ACTS

WILDE hummed execrably out of tune as he turned over the mass of papers on his desk. The various angles of a wide criminal investigation always put upon the man in charge an enormous amount of desk-work. Every morning sees an accumulation of reports by minor detectives, of statements, of letters, of opinions of specialists, of the results of enquiries sometimes at the ends of the earth. The great bulk of these are in the end utterly inconsequent — proof of the innocence of some suspect, the steps taken to trace a possible witness whose evidence turns out to be of no value, the record of the shadowing of some person, and a hundred and one other things that may lead nowhere. Nevertheless, each of these has to be minutely scrutinized and carefully collated. For hidden obscurely among the mass of words may lie the real key to a mystery.

The chief inspector hated the tedium of the job, but he always carried it through with precision and exactitude, dictating comments, replies, and instructions to a factotum as he proceeded. He finished the last document, thrust a few papers into his pocket, dismissed the clerk, pushed back his chair, and lay back with legs outstretched, hands deep in his

trousers pockets, and stared at the ceiling with pipe clenched fiercely between his teeth.

His thoughts were concentrated on Quenton Thorold. That very morning Dick Estrehan, well sheltered in the back of a taxicab, had been afforded a view of Thorold as the millionaire strolled along Piccadilly. At first sight he had unhesitatingly identified the American as the man he knew as Mr. Nemo, and although on a nearer view he had faltered and declared he was not so sure, Wilde was satisfied. There had been that among the papers on his desk which resolved any lingering doubt. He felt that he could at any time now justify the arrest of Quenton Thorold for murder.

Nevertheless, there remained a problem of tactics which left a fly in the ointment. The Black Ace was the figurehead in the series of outrages which had startled London, but Wilde felt that there was at least one other principal behind the scenes. The evidence against Thorold was almost conclusive. But on what pretext could he hope to establish a charge against Patricia Langton? That she was almost as closely involved as Thorold himself, the detective felt reasonably confident. But against her he had nothing that could be transformed into concrete testimony — nothing but suspicion.

Wilde brought his feet down with a thud to the floor. A colleague detained him with some piece of office gossip as he passed out. Wilde listened impatiently.

'There's too much darn law in this country,' he announced, utterly regardless of the point that the other was making. 'If this was France, you could make a man talk.' He went on his way, leaving the other man staring.

At Thorold's house the urbane Watkins answered his ring. Mr. Thorold, he explained, was out, had been out for some time. He couldn't say if he would be back to lunch. He might or he might not. Mr. Thorold was sometimes a little uncertain in his movements. He had left no instructions.

The butler had one hand on the frame of the door, the other on the door itself, and he pulled the latter forward an inch or two as a polite hint. Wilde's foot, however, was over the threshold.

'Watkins,' he said, 'you know who I am. I want to ask you a few questions.'

The butler was impassive. 'Mr. Thorold told me that you might try to question me again,' he said mildly. 'I am sorry, but I must decline to answer. I understand that a police officer has no right to demand information from any one he pleases.'

'Quite right.' Wilde nodded approval. 'I wouldn't force you for a minute. But see here, old fellow' — his tone was that of familiar friendship — 'there are a few trifles that you could put me right on without doing harm to any one. It might be worth something to you.'

'I shall tell Mr. Thorold that you tried to bribe me,' said Watkins stonily.

The detective hid his defeat in a gulp of laughter. 'Heaven preserve me from an honest fool,' he said. 'Would it strain your conscience too much to tell me where your master is likely to take lunch if he doesn't come back here? I badly want to see him.'

Watkins weighed the question thoughtfully. 'You might find him at the Strangers' Club,' he admitted. 'Good-day, sir. Thank you, sir.' Wilde withdrew his foot and the door closed.

Although the millionaire had Scotland Yard men at his heels at practically every step he took, no immediate report of his movements was made to Wilde save in the event of something exceptional occurring. Consequently the detective had no means of knowing where the other was at any given moment.

He walked slowly to the vicinity of the Strangers' Club, where a few minutes' search led him to a smartly dressed young man idly engrossed in the operation of a gang of road repairers. A word was exchanged and Wilde went on to the club and sent in his name.

Thorold came down to the hall and welcomed him exuberantly. 'This is good of you. I've been missing your cheerful face. I just love to have you hovering around ready to check any of my sinister and subtle moves. You're just in time for lunch. Come along and tell me your latest pathetic little story.'

Wilde was watching him warily. 'Afraid I shall have to save you the price of that lunch,' he said. 'I want you to come along with me to the Yard. I'll try to get a few sandwiches sent in there.'

A momentary contortion passed over the face of the other — so quickly had it gone that with a less observant man than Wilde it might have escaped notice. Then Thorold shook his head with smiling nonchalance. 'That's too bad. I hate sandwiches.' He thrust a hand in the crook of Wilde's elbow. 'I must really insist that, since you are here, you eat in comfort. It will keep your strength up, man. A strenuous worker should never neglect his grub. I never do. Whatever you want me for, an hour can't make such a deuce of a difference.'

'My business can't wait,' retorted Wilde, and there was a harsh note in his voice. 'I want to see you where we can talk. You are coming with me.'

Thorold disengaged his hold. 'Suppose I don't?' he asked.

'I won't suppose you such a fool,' retorted the detective.

The eyes of the two men met. For the second Wilde doubted whether his assertiveness would not be met by a peremptory defiance. He was alert, even for a physical attack. Suddenly the dogged light that had been aroused in Thorold's eyes faded. He made a whimsical little gesture of resignation. 'Oh, all right. If you put it that way, I suppose I'll

come. Wait a second while I get my hat and coat.'

It was Wilde's hand that was on Thorold's arm this time. 'I'll come with you if you don't mind,' he said.

As they left the club arm in arm, the well-dressed young man relinquished his interest in the road-making operations and fell into step a few paces behind them. Thorold threw him a glance of mild scrutiny.

'Ah, it's my young friend,' he remarked. 'He's wasted as a detective, Wilde. He would make a fortune as a quick-change artist. I assume from your manner,' he went on, 'that this is an arrest. Do you know, I am disappointed. It's too tame. Do you know, I always had an idea that you dropped a hand on a man's shoulder and cried in a loud and audible voice, "In the King's name I arrest you for" — by the way, what am I arrested for? It's a mere matter of idle curiosity, but I'd like to know.'

'I am not arresting you — yet,' answered Wilde. 'That will be decided later. Meanwhile, if I were you I shouldn't do any talking till we get to the Yard. There I shall ask you to explain certain things, and, if you do so satisfactorily, you will come to no harm. If you can't, it will be my duty to prefer a serious charge against you.'

He put out his hand to hail a taxi and the remainder of the short journey was made in silence.

At Scotland Yard, Thorold was ushered into a business-like private office, and, with a half-smile lurking about his lips, took a chair at the chief inspector's invitation.

'Now,' said Wilde, seating himself at his desk and drawing forward a few sheets of official foolscap, 'I am compelled to tell you that, unless you can show me some different interpretation to the facts I have learned, I shall have to take you into custody for murder. Clearly understand that you are not forced to say anything. But I shall write down anything you do say and it may be used as evidence.'

'I understand,' said Thorold, crossing his legs and leaning back. 'I'll be careful. What is it you want to know?'

Wilde relaxed his official attitude somewhat. 'Smoke if you like,' he said. 'Would you care for a whiskey-and-soda? No? Oh, very well. First of all I want you to give me an account of your movements on these days.' He picked up a scrap of paper and read several dates. 'Tell me what you were doing and whom you saw.'

The millionaire threw up his hands in mock horror. 'That's a nice kind of thing to throw at a man without notice,' he protested. 'Suffering snakes! How can you expect any human man to remember. Why do you want those particular days?'

'Think,' said Wilde grimly. 'On one of those days

Dick Estrehan was doped and inveigled to the office in Farringdon Street. On another, Dutchy Ogle was robbed by Paddy the Ghost. Then Velvet was murdered. Markwell and Murraystein were tarred and feathered. I was slogged and one of my men was laid out. That's enough for you to consider for the moment.' His fingers played with a scrap of paper as, with arms on his desk, he turned his hawk face toward Thorold and waited for an answer.

Thorold gently lifted his shoulders. 'That's a pretty list,' he commented. 'Sure you haven't forgotten anything? What about the day I strangled the blind beggar's child and stole her money-box? If you've got all that against me — and can prove it — I guess I'll have to take my medicine. If it was to save myself from being drawn and quartered as well as hanged, I couldn't say what I was doing this day week.'

'Listen to this,' said Wilde, writing rapidly. "I, Quenton Thorold, a natural-born citizen of the United States of America, having been cautioned by Chief Inspector Wilde that anything I say may be used as evidence hereafter, make the following statement. I am unable to give any account of my whereabouts on ——"

The significance of the written word seemed to impress the millionaire. 'Half a moment,' he interposed. 'Let's have this thing straight before you start making documents. Tell me what you think

you've got against me and I'll tell you where you're wrong.'

The detective placed his chin in his hand and reflected for a few moments. He perceived that Thorold had recognized the peril of answering questions blindly. His action had been strictly legal, although it might have been on the extreme verge of the rules laid down by His Majesty's judges for the guidance of police officers when questioning suspects. But Thorold was a shrewd man. Wilde had no illusions on that point. His attitude suggested that he had made up his mind. After all, the millionaire would have to know sooner or later. The detective felt his hand was strong enough to be played openly.

'All right,' he said. 'I'm willing to let you know where you stand. Of course you know that we have got hold of Estrehan and Stella Cliffe?'

Thorold gave a little start of surprise which the detective admired as a pretty piece of acting. 'You don't say!' he commented. 'You're right on the job sometimes, Wilde.'

'One of the things you've got to get over is this. Both of these people have seen the Black Ace. Both of them declare that you are uncommonly like him. And Stella has told a story which suggests that you — as Thorold — have been trying to drag her into the schemes of the Black Ace. Why, I don't know.'

'A charming girl. I am an unmarried man, you know,' said Thorold. 'I suppose she's told you that I have been helping her with her expenses?'

'Yes. This is no joke,' reproved Wilde. 'It's an odd thing for a man to pay a crook money without any reason.'

Thorold was idly tying knots in his handkerchief. 'I do lots of things without any reason,' he said languidly. 'While you are on the subject, I'd just like to point this out. If I heard you right, neither of these two will positively identify me. They will only say that I'm uncommonly like your pal. Now you made an error that way. If you hadn't admitted a mistake yourself, it might get by. You will be an important witness to me.'

Wilde lit his pipe and jerked out his words between blasts of smoke. 'I've a card that will trump that. It was clever of you to get in a man who had some general resemblance to yourself, in build and voice. By that means it was simple to confuse a number of people and it left you a possible way out if worse came to the worst. I'll admit that you had me guessing. One of those simple things I could kick myself for overlooking.'

Watching narrowly, he saw little lines of amusement break on the other's face. Thorold shook his head condescendingly. 'That sounds plausible,' he said. 'The only thing against it is that it didn't happen. Where is this double of mine?'

'You deny it,' said the detective. 'I thought that you would. Well, we shall see.'

At the back of his mind he felt a little shaken. The theory of two men who were so much alike that they could be mistaken for each other was the only one that would account for the facts as he knew them. His attempt to surprise an admission had been defeated. He passed to another point.

'You have a bank account in this country. I have been having that looked into. You know that Dick Estrehan embezzled £20,000 from his employers and that that sum, or rather bonds of that value, were sent back to them anonymously? Now, before that went back you withdrew £20,000 from your account. A curious coincidence. What did you want that money for?'

'I'll confess I don't know. I'm pretty careless on money matters. Perhaps I was running short of cigarettes.'

'There are some odd features about other amounts withdrawn at various times. But we'll leave that for the moment. I want you to take your mind back to the evening when Velvet was murdered. You had a pistol then which I gave back to you after examining it. Do you know where that gun is now?'

Something of the air of indifferent boredom vanished from Thorold. He pushed back the knotted handkerchief into his breast-pocket and glanced

keenly at his interlocutor. 'Knocking about at home somewhere, I dare say,' he said. 'I took your words to heart. Remember, you told me that it might get me into trouble. Besides, my tailor told me that it spoiled the set of my clothes.'

Wilde fumbled in a drawer of his desk and, producing an automatic, dropped it on the desk in front of him. 'This weapon,' he explained, 'was found in a resort of associates of the Black Ace. In fact, it nearly killed a man. Now, when I handled your automatic I looked at the number on the butt. It was 53422. This gun is numbered 53422.'

'I'll take your word for it that this is mine,' said Thorold coolly. 'That looks a rather nasty jolt for me. As I said, I thought it was at home.'

'There you are,' said the detective, as if in conclusion. 'I don't bear any malice, Thorold, although you made me doubt myself once or twice. Add certain other little facts to these — such as the use of your stationery — and it will be clear that I've got you like this.' He clenched and unclenched his hand. 'But if you can put any other complexion on these things, I'll be glad to listen.'

'A pretty piece of work,' agreed Thorold, as dispassionately as if he had no personal concern in the affair. 'Looks as if you hadn't left many loopholes, doesn't it?' He tugged at his upper lip. 'Circumstantial evidence can be the very devil. What would you do if you were in my place?'

Wilde began to tidy his desk as though to signify that the interview was drawing to a close. He had convinced himself that the self-possessed American before him was a clever — if probably mad — criminal. So far as he was concerned, it had been part of the day's work to bring him to justice. That aside, he rather liked Thorold. But his job was still unfinished while the rest of the gang remained at large. He thought that he detected in the other's question a gesture of defeat, a sign of weakening, and he pressed his advantage.

'I shouldn't have volunteered advice,' he said, 'but I can see that you realize you're in a very nasty hole — a very nasty hole, indeed. I can't hold out any promise, but as man to man it wouldn't do you any harm, now, to make the whole story plain. You've not been in this alone. Why should you be the only one to suffer?'

He had seen many murderers caught in the toils and accept the knowledge that the worst was likely to happen in all kinds of ways. Never had he seen one act quite as Thorold acted.

The millionaire broke into a shout of laughter in which there was no sign of hysteria. 'Blow the gaff? Is that the technical term or is it out of date? Own up now, Wilde, that you're as proud as a dog with two tails at having cornered me. You'll get no admissions from me. I'm just as innocent as you are. But I won't argue. Lead me on to the dungeon cell.'

The cloistered calm of Scotland Yard was broken by a mellow voice warbling an extract from 'Pinafore':

'But when is known
The secret I have to tell,
Wide will be thrown
The door of his dungeon cell.'

'You might do me a favour, Wilde. You might let Miss Langton know that I've been immured.'

'I don't think,' muttered the detective beneath his breath.

CHAPTER XXIII

MISS LANGTON EXACTS A TRUCE

THOROLD was held under that rule which permits a suspect to be detained for twenty-four hours before a charge is made against him. He accepted the situation lightly, and Wilde had few hopes that even the solitude of a cell would induce him to change his attitude of amused indifference. But there was just the chance. Theoretically he was not a prisoner, and there is a subtle legal difference in the manner in which a police officer may approach a man detained and one actually charged.

Wilde also had another reason for adopting this course. There was no dubiety in his mind as to the strength of the case against the millionaire. He had an idea that the work which remained would be simpler if the fact that he had Thorold in custody was not known for a while.

All the rest of that day he and his subordinates were busy sifting clues that invariably led them nowhere. But then nine tenths of detective work is this kind of futile drudgery and the chief inspector accepted it with philosophy. If he kept on, his experience told him that things would straighten themselves out. Nevertheless, he was a tired man when he had finished, and it was with a sigh of

relief that he left the Yard. He enjoyed a leisurely dinner at a restaurant in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, where the food and wine were good and the charges tempered to the modest purse of a chief detective inspector. He even ventured on the uncommon indulgence of a cigar and liqueur and let his faculties lapse into a luxurious mental languor. He roused himself at last, paid his bills, and, uncertain of any plans for spending the remainder of the evening, moved out into the street.

More as a matter of habit than anything else, he tossed a coin to a paper-seller and stood for an instant while he unfolded the sheet and glanced at the headlines. In spite of all his precautions some hint of the detention of Thorold might have leaked out. He became instantly alert as a paragraph in the 'stop press' column caught his attention.

STRANGE OUTRAGE AT KENNINGTON

As a girl whose name is given as Stella Cliffe was walking in the Kennington Road this evening, a passer-by suddenly pulled a revolver and fired two shots at her in quick succession. Before he could be seized, the assailant had jumped on a motor-car that had apparently been waiting and disappeared.

It will be remembered that Stella Cliffe was in the company of the man Grimshaw at the time that he was murdered in circumstances that bear an extraordinary resemblance at the Gnomes Club. She unaccountably vanished after that episode, and it is understood that the

police, having reason to fear that an attempt would be made on her life, had arranged that she was quietly to remain under their protection. In fact, at the moment she was shot, she was in the company of one of the woman detective inspectors from Scotland Yard. The crime is believed to have been the work of some of the gang who recently effected the audacious escape of a prisoner from the Old Bailey.

The injured girl was removed to the local infirmary for medical attention. Her condition is serious.

'Damn, oh, damn! The inept fools,' groaned Wilde, crushing the paper to a ball and waving a taxi to a halt.

It was in no pleasant frame of mind that he reached Scotland Yard, where he was welcomed with relief. Search, he was told, had been made high and low for him during the last hour. Meantime, a section of the Flying Squad had been sent to Kennington and everything done that was possible, but so far with no result.

The woman detective inspector explained that the newspaper account was roughly accurate. 'I live at Kennington, as you know, and I was careful not to let the girl for an instant out of my sight. We were out for a little fresh air and exercise when it happened. The whole thing was a matter of seconds. The fellow had fired twice and was away in the car before we could do anything.'

'But, my dear Miss Poining,' protested Wilde, a little hampered in his vocabulary, because, al-

though she was a fellow-officer in the C.I.D., she was still a woman, 'there were three of you. Why should I go out of my way to put three people to watch that girl unless something of this sort was likely to happen? What did that pair of slugs think that they had guns for?'

'They are not to be blamed,' retorted Miss Poining, with spirit. 'I don't believe that even you, Mr. Wilde, expected an attempt to kill her. They were thirty yards behind, and before they could reach us it was all over. I have written a report, which you can see when you like.'

The chief inspector shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah, well, it's no use crying over spilt milk. How is Stella? Is she as bad as the papers say?'

The woman shook her head. 'No. She was lucky. She got one bullet through her arm and the other grazed her shoulder. She's in the infirmary. She was conscious and comparatively bright when I left.'

'I'll pop along and see her,' announced Wilde.

Stella, a little pale, but with her indomitable cheerfulness unquenched, received him gaily. 'I scarcely like receiving gentlemen visitors like this,' she said, with a smile, 'but it's all right and proper with you because you're an official, aren't you? You'd scarcely notice seeing a lady in her bedroom.'

'You don't need a chaperon,' he retorted. 'I

just dropped in to see that you were comfortable. This is a bit of tough luck for you.'

'Yes,' she agreed. 'He got me, after all, you see, Mr. Wilde, but he didn't get me good. I suppose he reckoned on stopping li'l' Stella doing her star turn in the witness box one of these days. I have been waiting for you to come along. You can get this bird open and shut now. I saw him close when he pointed the gun, and all you got to do is to go and get the bracelets on him.'

'Who was it?'

'You know as well as I do,' she asserted. 'Who would it be but that smooth grafter, the Black Ace — Mr. Quenton Thorold? No doubt about it. He couldn't buy me, he couldn't frighten me, so he tries to kill me. Well, we'll see.' She snuggled a little more comfortably beneath the bedclothes.

Martin Wilde made no immediate comment. The girl thoroughly believed that her assailant was Quenton Thorold. But he knew that Quenton Thorold had been in a police station cell at the moment she was attacked. This, then, must have been the other man, the man whom Wilde himself had encountered in Farringdon Street. A momentary doubt crossed the detective's mind. He dismissed it instantly. Whoever had tried to murder the girl, Quenton Thorold was the Black Ace. The facts were too plain. But the value of Stella's evidence was heavily discounted from the legal point

of view. She had declared Thorold to be the Black Ace. Now she was positive that some other man was Thorold.

‘You saw him plainly,’ he said slowly, ‘and you’re sure that it was Thorold?’

She jerked her head vigorously and gave a little cry of pain. ‘Ouch! I hurt my arm that time. Yes, I’m as sure that it was him as that you are you. I’d got cause to notice him, hadn’t I? Say, you’re a live man, Mr. Wilde, but you’re wasting your time here. Why don’t you go and gather him in before he gets wise?’

He gathered his hat and stick. ‘I’ll see about it, Stella,’ he said. ‘Look after yourself, my girl, and do what the doctor tells you. I’ll look in and see you again sometime, soon.’

‘Toodle-oo,’ she smiled.

A man was sitting outside the door engrossed in a newspaper. Wilde menaced him with a forefinger. ‘Miss Poining says that no one’s to blame for this business,’ he said sternly in a low voice. ‘I’m not so sure. If Jackson and you had had your wits about you, that bird couldn’t have made a getaway. But let me tell you that, if anything goes wrong with that kid in there after this’ — he jerked his thumb backwards over his shoulder — ‘you’ll be for the high jump.’

Downstairs at the main entrance a woman was arguing with an attendant. Wilde caught the tail-

end of her words. 'I tell you, I must see her. I am a friend and ——'

'Good-evening, Miss Langton,' interposed the detective.

Patricia Langton wheeled about. 'Good-evening, Mr. Wilde. This man tells me I cannot see Stella. There is surely some mistake.'

'She is not allowed to receive visitors at present,' said Wilde mildly.

The woman's face became smooth and smiling. 'I see. Quite as you like.' She laid a small gloved hand on his arm. 'Do you mind if I walk a little way with you, Mr. Wilde?'

Almost before he had assented, her hand was in the crook of his arm and they were walking familiarly down the grey street. 'As a fact I was really looking for you. I had a suspicion that I might find you here, but I did not care to ask for you directly. I have been to Scotland Yard and all that they would say was that you were out.'

'I am flattered,' he said gravely. 'What can I do for you?'

'I want to know why you have arrested Quenton Thorold and where I can see him?' she said.

He had expected something of this sort at her first words, but, even so, he was a little at a loss for a reply. She could have no absolute knowledge of what he had done that day. Unquestionably she was guessing. 'What makes you think that I have arrested him?'

There was ever such a tiny increase in the pressure on his arm. The woman laughed. 'I am not a child, Mr. Wilde. For one thing, you were enquiring for him at his house this morning. For another, you took him away from his club a little before lunch and he has not been seen since. For a third, an oral message has been received at his house that he is unexpectedly detained and will not be home to-night. Two and two make four, Mr. Wilde. Your intentions in regard to him have been obvious for some time.'

'This is my car,' he said, halting by the police touring car that had brought him from the Yard. 'Can I give you a lift?'

'My time is my own,' she agreed, and allowed herself to be assisted to a seat. 'You have not answered my question.'

'I assume,' he said, settling himself by her side, and nodding to the driver to proceed, 'that you have been talking to Watkins. He told you that I had gone on to the club and the club servants told you that Thorold and I had left together.'

She shifted her position with a kind of abrupt impatience so that she was sitting sideways with a full view of him. 'And then I saw this account of the attack on Stella in the papers and guessed where I might get word of you. Why can't you answer me plainly? You know why I have come to you.'

'Oh, yes,' he agreed. 'It's pretty evident. You

are on a fishing excursion. You want to learn how much I know and what I intend to do. Possibly you are a little anxious about yourself. I am afraid of you, Miss Langton. I own it freely. As I said once before, you have brains. But I'll tell you this, since you are not likely to believe any denials: I have detained Thorold on suspicion of being concerned in murder and other crimes — in short, of being the criminal who calls himself the Black Ace.'

'What childish rubbish!' she ejaculated, with an asperity that was foreign to her. 'Why, Quenton is the last man in the world — the thing is absurd. What have you got against him?'

A grim smile shaped on his face at the naïveté of the question, and he wagged his head tolerantly. 'A lot, I am afraid,' he replied. 'You will learn in due time. Here we are at Scotland Yard. I am at your disposal if you would care to continue this talk.'

It was at the back of his mind that this meeting had fallen apropos. If Patricia Langton had not sought him out, he would have had to find her. In her present mood she might be easier to handle than if he had taken the initiative. He had hoped to keep Thorold's friends for a time in ignorance of the fate that had befallen him. Since, however, this woman now knew, there was no real point in preserving the traditional secretiveness of Scotland Yard.

Although Scotland Yard is always open night and day, after six in the evening only a skeleton staff, to deal with emergencies, remains on the premises. As every detective off duty is compelled to sleep at his home failing special permission, and the whole nine hundred men of the Criminal Investigation Department can be mobilized within half an hour, this is not so reckless as it sounds. But as Wilde led her within the building she noted how curiously deserted the place seemed.

Wilde thrust open a door as they passed along a corridor and addressed the inspector in charge. 'I shall be about for a little, Grey. I don't want to be disturbed.'

Patricia Langton settled herself with a quizzical smile as they reached the chief inspector's severely furnished office. She was keen enough to realize something of what was passing in the man's mind. Nevertheless, she was serenely confident that whatever was gained during the interview the balance would be on her side.

'Well,' she said easily, 'may I resume my fishing? What is the case against Quenton?'

He pressed the tips of his fingers together and leaned back in his chair. 'My dear lady, you know perfectly well that, if I played the game as I ought according to the official rules, I should refuse to tell you anything. But there are certain things we both know. Why should we pretend to each other? We

are on opposite sides. Say, if you like, that I propose to land you in gaol sooner or later. There is nothing personal in that. I rather like you, but I have to do my job. You, on the other hand, naturally propose to prevent me if you can and, incidentally, to save your friends. The difference is that I am hampered by rules, while you and those on your side are not concerned what you do to preserve your own safety. Shall we talk on that basis?’

The toe of her shoe tapped the floor gently during this opening, and her face expressed a half-puzzled amusement. ‘I am one of a gang of criminals and you are hinting at some sort of bargain with me? Is that it?’ she asked slowly. ‘You are trying to get some admission from me?’

He grinned at the quickness with which she had blocked his gambit. ‘There could be no bargain,’ he retorted. ‘I was merely suggesting that we meet on common ground.’

‘I quite appreciate that,’ she answered, with a meaning that was not lost on the detective, and rose with dignity. ‘No doubt I am wasting my time. You have made up your mind. Had you adopted a different line, Mr. Wilde, I might have saved you from making the most egregious blunder of your life.’

He put out a protesting hand. ‘I am sorry you take it like that. Please don’t go, Miss Langton. I apologize. You wanted to hear about Thorold, you know.’

She sat down again and her eyes met his firmly. 'As long as you understand that I shall resent any insinuation that I am a criminal.'

'I shall be careful of your susceptibilities,' he pleaded, with a touch of irony that was rather in the words than in the tone. 'Now, in regard to Quenton Thorold. These are the facts that have led me to take action.' He quietly recited the main heads of his case, and she listened without interruption, her cheek leaning against the palm of her hand.

'That is all?' she asked, when he had finished. 'You think that you can hang a man like Quenton Thorold on that?'

'I don't care whether he hangs or not,' he retorted. 'That is a matter for the courts. It is circumstantial evidence, but it's da—— very black.'

'Damning, you were about to say,' she remarked. He nodded without comment.

She got to her feet.

'May I make one suggestion? I shouldn't be in any hurry to prefer a formal charge if I were you. For within twenty-four hours I will show you how utterly and preposterously wrong you are. A blind and deaf idiot would see farther in front of his nose than you do.'

He bowed and walked to the door as though to open it for her. Instead of doing so, he placed his broad back against the panels and faced her. 'I

think I see far enough,' he said mildly. 'Just one moment, please. Before you go, I must insist on one or two explanations.'

She gripped the little bag she was carrying so tightly that her knuckles showed white. 'Insist!' she repeated.

'Yes, insist,' he retorted sternly. 'Even without that last remark, I should have known you were keeping back something. You have been in constant and close association with Thorold. An attempt has been made to murder a witness who could give evidence on that point to-night. Believing what I believe, I cannot expose any more people to these risks. I am not satisfied. I call your bluff, Miss Langton. Unless you can give some satisfactory explanation, I shall have to detain you.'

Although her face was white, there was an angry blaze in her grey eyes, and her slim form seemed to quiver with a suppressed emotion. 'You wouldn't dare! You had better let me pass!' she said tensely.

Wilde leaned firmly against the door and shook his head. Her bag dropped unheeded to the floor and he became aware that the grim muzzle of a small automatic pistol was pointed unwaveringly at his chest. 'I shall shoot if you compel me,' she said resolutely, and he believed her.

A quick smile leapt to his face as he stood away and opened the door. 'This is very silly of you, Miss Langton,' he said in matter-of-fact tones.

‘It will do you no good. But — go.’ He waved a hand to the open door.

She moved forward a step and then hesitated, regarding him suspiciously. His ready capitulation had alarmed her. ‘Please close that door again,’ she ordered sharply, and, as he obeyed, she went on. ‘Of course, you meant to raise the alarm directly this pistol was off you. It would be impossible for me to get out of this place.’

‘*Touché*,’ he admitted. ‘You guessed it. You can’t get away, not even by shooting me — which you aren’t foolish enough to do. You might have pulled the trigger on a first impulse, but not now that you have had a few seconds to think.’

He thrust his hands in his pockets and looked nonchalantly down upon her. The weapon remained steady. If just for one split fraction of a second he could distract her attention, the rest would be easy. He calculated the distance between them. But the opportunity did not come. The grey eyes did not falter.

‘I’d hate to wing you,’ she declared, ‘but if I must, I must. It would spoil everything if I were tied up now. I know I can’t get away without one of two things. The choice is yours, Mr. Wilde. Either I’ve got to make you incapable of interference or you’ve got to give me your word that you’ll make no move against my liberty till this time to-morrow. After that you can do what you like. Which shall it be?’

'That would allow you time to get out of the country,' he said thoughtfully.

'I shall not attempt to escape,' she asserted impatiently. 'Well?'

He noted the slight gloved finger slowly increasing the tension on the trigger. His first inclination was laughingly to defy her. The probability was that her courage would fail at the point of shooting him down in cold blood. But was it such a probability? He realized that she was desperate and no one can say how far a desperate woman will go. After all, he was beginning to see the end. Why boggle at a little delay? Less harm would probably happen that way than if he were placed out of action.

'You win,' he declared. 'I leave you alone for twenty-four hours.'

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIRE AT CLARGES STREET

IT is a strange habit of Scotland Yard detectives, justified by generations of immunity in the face of threats, never to worry unduly about their personal security. Whatever menaces a crook may make against a police officer, he never goes out of his way to carry them into effect. At the worst he will use violence to escape imminent arrest, but so long as a detective lets him alone, so long will he let a detective alone.

Since his encounter with the Black Ace, Wilde had carried a revolver. He had even gone so far as to spend half an hour at target practice at a gunsmith's gallery near the Strand and had come to the conclusion that marksmanship was not among his accomplishments. He even doubted if he could draw the gun quickly enough from his pocket if he was ever faced with instant occasion for its use. Nevertheless, he continued to carry it because in case of questions he would be able to assert that he had taken the precaution. But beyond that he took no special steps to guard himself.

He was as regular in his habits as his profession would allow, and the landlady from whom he rented a couple of rooms in Bloomsbury had a vague notion

that he was connected with the police. All she cared about was that he was a genial and considerate gentleman who never gave any trouble, even though, once in a while, his business took him out or brought him in at odd hours.

So it was with surprise that she was roused from her bed in the vicinity of midnight and discovered the disturber of her slumbers to be none other than her lodger.

'I'm sorry to trouble you,' he declared. 'Has any one called for me during the day?'

She huddled her dressing-gown more closely about her, for the night was chilly. 'I don't mind,' she said. 'Yes, a man did call a couple of hours ago, but it was only a policeman. He brought a note from you asking me to let him into your rooms to find a paper. Is anything wrong? I wouldn't have done it unless you had written. Besides, it was a policeman.'

'It's quite all right,' he reassured her. 'Have you got that note?'

She thought for an instant. 'I don't know what I did with it. I believe I threw it away.'

He thanked her and with renewed apologies withdrew to his bedroom. There, seated on his bed, he again read the note he had found pinned to his pillow.

MY DEAR WILDE, — I hate to see a man of sense wasting his energy. I also hate to see an innocent person put to trouble and inconvenience. You have, in short, got the

wrong man. Forgive the little stroke of melodrama used with the intention of emphasizing this letter. Had I sent it by mail, it might be less convincing to your mind. As a further piece of evidence, I enclose one of your cards — you will remember that you lost your case at the Gnomes Club.

Please take this as a friendly hint. You entertain me. In the unlikely event of your becoming a real danger, you will see how easy it would be for me to remove you. But I think that such a necessity is remote.

The letter was typed and unsigned, but there was the usual ace of clubs pinned to one of Wilde's cards. He thrust the envelope and its contents impatiently into his pocket and made a tour of his rooms. There were plenty of trifling signs which showed that the intruder had made a careful examination of the place, and the detective guessed that the search had been for papers in connection with the investigation. Since he never left documents out of his sight apart from the office, this could have had no result. Some private correspondence had been disarranged, but nothing was missing.

He undressed and, before he got into bed, locked the door of his room, sneering at himself for a fool as he did so. For half an hour before he dropped to sleep, he lay in the dark considering the situation. It was physically impossible that either Thorold or Miss Langton could have been concerned in this exploit. The one was in a cell and the other had been with him most of the evening. The audacity of

the incident more than the incident itself weighed on his mind. It showed that the initiative and daring of the gang were not entirely inspired by Thorold. There was another brain at work. To some extent that jumped against the theory which had possessed him. He had guessed at a person physically resembling Thorold who was used by the millionaire, but he had assumed only one directing mind. That idea had been shattered. Who was this other person? He flung his mind back over the case. No one of the persons whom he knew or believed to be mixed up in the affair seemed to him to carry guns enough. Strangely enough, he gave scarcely a thought to the ostensible reason of the letter — the suggestion that Thorold was innocent. If any one thought that he was to be shaken into disbelieving plain facts, he was mistaken. There was the evidence. Let Thorold answer it if he could. So he fell asleep.

It was while he was splashing in his bath the next morning that he became aware of an insistent tapping at the door. His landlady raised her voice shrilly to reply to his question.

'Scotland Yard wish to speak to you very urgently, sir. They are waiting on the telephone. I told 'em ——'

'In one minute!' he shouted, and reached for a towel.

It was less than that time when, half-dried, and

with a dressing-gown clinging clammily about him, he took the receiver. 'Wilde speaking,' he said. 'What's the trouble?'

'That house in Clarges Street,' came from the other end of the wire, 'Thorold's house. We've just had word that it's been completely burnt out. Thought you'd like to know.'

'Thanks.' Wilde's voice carried no more emotion than if he had been told it was a fine day. 'Send a car for me. I'll be right down.'

Yet as he hung up the receiver, he cursed himself for a dilatory fool. If there had been any evidence in that house, it had now vanished for ever. He had believed that he could hold Thorold without alarming his confederates. That was why he had delayed the obvious step of immediately searching Thorold's house. To have done so would have been to disclose his hand. But why had it not occurred to him, after his encounter with Miss Langton, that he was courting trouble in sticking to his original plan?

Dressing hastily, he was ready by the time a car had arrived and drove straight to Clarges Street. The usual curious crowd, held back by a police cordon, was watching the still smouldering ruins. Wilde descended from the car and picked his way through. A few minutes' conversation with the fire brigade superintendent and some of his own officers who had been watching the place put him in possession of the facts. The fire had broken out in the early morning,

so suddenly that within five minutes of the alarm the house had been a roaring mass of flames. From the first there had been no hope of saving the place. Two servants had been roused and rescued in the nick of time, but it was unfortunately beyond doubt that the butler Watkins and his wife had perished in the flames. In fact, said the fire brigade superintendent, some charred bones had already been retrieved, and no doubt others would be found as soon as it was possible thoroughly to explore the ruins.

‘Incendiary, of course,’ commented Wilde.

The fire brigade officer gave a curt laugh. ‘Not a doubt of it. Substantial houses like these don’t go up like a sheet of tissue paper unless some one has prepared them pretty thoroughly. The place reeked of petrol fumes when we got here. Pretty bad luck on that butler and his wife. This will bring it into your province, Mr. Wilde. It amounts to murder.’

The detective nodded, and walked nearer to the smoking ruins, among which the firemen were still busy. For a while he watched in meditative thought. A twitch at his elbow made him turn, and he confronted the Vine Street divisional detective inspector.

‘Nasty mess they’ve made of the place, sir,’ he observed. ‘A funny business.’

‘Funny isn’t exactly the word I should use,’ declared Wilde, a little irritably. He was not in the

mood for casual conversation. 'Have you found out anything about it? It hits me. This house was under observation by my orders.'

'I gathered you'd an interest in it,' returned the other. 'I've got the divisional surgeon over here. He's been looking at those bones. There's rather a queer thing. I wish you'd have a word with him.'

Wilde followed his colleague to where a little red-headed man stood with head a little on one side while he turned over and over a charred shinbone. 'Good-morning, doctor,' he said. 'I'm Wilde from the Yard. What's this about these bones? They're human, aren't they?'

The medical man glanced slowly round to make sure that his reply would not be overheard. 'Oh, yes, they're human all right. But they are not the bones of any one who was burnt to death in that house. The fact is that these bones are medical specimens which have probably been used at some medical college for demonstration purposes. See here.' He went into technicalities.

Wilde lit a pipe and listened closely. Subconsciously he was turning this new complication over in his mind, striving to fit it into a place where it should logically belong. Dimly his ideas began to readjust themselves. He smiled grimly.

'That's very interesting, doctor. Let's keep this to ourselves for a while.' He turned to the divisional man. 'The newspaper fellows will be looking for a

story out of this. When they approach you, you'd better give 'em one as a favour. We are satisfied that this was an incendiary fire — and that two people have been killed as a result. We have clues as to the author — make this vague — and when he is arrested, he will be charged with murder. Something on those lines.'

CHAPTER XXV

THOROLD IS RELEASED

QUENTON THOROLD had accepted his confinement with easy philosophy. He had commented favourably upon the unexpected comfort of the British police cell until he learned that he was privileged to occupy not an ordinary cell, but a detention room reserved for the use of those better-behaved persons who have to be held for a time by the police. Beyond the fact that the window was barred and that the heavy door contained a 'Judas hole' through which the gaoler might observe him from without, he might have been in a small, cheap, and plainly furnished room of some second-class hotel.

Into this place he had been ushered by a uniformed inspector who told him that he could have his meals sent in from any place he wished so long as he was prepared to pay. Promptly he took advantage of this concession by outlining a dinner to be ordered from the best restaurant in London, and genially suggesting that the inspector should join him at the meal.

The other shook his head. 'Invite me to a dinner like that when you're outside and I'll come quick enough,' he said. 'But here it's against the regulations. Make yourself comfortable. There are maga-

zines and newspapers on the table, and if you want anything, just ring.' The door fell noiselessly to behind him and the faintest click indicated that it was locked.

Thorold found that time passed quicker than he had anticipated. He lingered over dinner, and occasionally during the evening the inspector and a burly, red-faced plain-clothes man, whom he did not recognize, dropped in for a casual chat. He did not imagine that this sort of friendliness toward a prisoner was usual, and, although they might have been actuated by curiosity, he more than half-suspected that they had received their instructions from Wilde. But they did nothing more than make themselves pleasant. They made no reference to the circumstances that had brought him there and allowed him to direct the talk into whatsoever channels he chose. He hinted at his suspicions to the plain-clothes man, who shrugged his shoulders.

'No, there's nothing of that sort. Fact is that in the ordinary way I or some one else would have been in here with you all the time. Mr. Wilde thought that you wouldn't like that, but he asked us just to drop in and keep you company once in a while. Some people are apt to go queer when they're brought in first off on a heavy charge. Say the word and you won't see any more of us.'

'That's very considerate,' said Thorold. 'But don't worry on my account.'

In spite of the unaccustomed nature of his surroundings, Thorold slept that night with the easy soundness of a child. It was in the morning that he began to feel the tedium of confinement. Wilde, striding in unannounced, found his prisoner with bent brows engaged in a game of patience.

Thorold swept the cards into a heap as the detective entered and nodded in curt greeting.

'I believe I could have worked that out if you hadn't interrupted,' he grumbled. 'You're an inopportune man, Wilde. Have you got a few more murders up against me?'

The chief inspector seated himself heavily. 'You look none the worse for your night here,' he said. 'I hope they've made you comfortable?'

'Finest rest-cure I ever had,' the millionaire reassured him. 'Got all this retirement to a monastery stuff beaten to a frazzle. Thank you for asking.'

'Don't feel any more communicative now, I suppose?' ventured Wilde.

'An oyster is a garrulous animal compared to me.'

A weary smile passed over the detective's face. 'When you were a boy,' he said, 'somebody must have neglected his duty. He ought to have whaled the hide off you.' His face grew serious. 'I came in to tell you that your house has been burnt out. Only the walls are left standing. The fire was deliberate.'

Thorold elevated his eyebrows, but beyond that

he betrayed no symptom of surprise. 'Well, it isn't my house. I merely rented it. My personal effects are insured. I shall merely have to put up at an hotel — unless you continue to provide me with free board and room here.' A thought struck him. 'Was any one hurt?'

'The butler and his wife are missing,' explained Wilde, cautious lest he should say too much. 'The other servants escaped safely. We'll know more about it after the ruins have been examined.'

'They were good servants,' said Thorold. 'I'll find it hard to get a butler like Watkins. He had qualities that you don't often find nowadays. He could mix a cocktail or tie a dress tie or handle my correspondence better than any man I ever had. He was butler, valet, and secretary all rolled into one. I suppose' — he yawned and stretched himself — 'that if I hadn't been your guest here, you'd have lumped this on to me?'

Wilde made no attempt at denial. 'Perhaps I should,' he agreed. 'I reckon that whoever set that house alight must have had good reasons. If there was something there — something in the nature of evidence that could not have easily been got away in view of the fact that the place was watched — a fire was very handy. I'd certainly have suspected you — in other circumstances. But there are things which make me waver in my opinion about you. I have thought you a clever and unscrupulous scoun-

drel, but I think now I may have jumped a little too quickly. Don't misunderstand me. I feel I've been justified in everything I've done. If I've made a mistake, I apologize. Whether you're guilty or innocent, you're holding something back on me. You know something. I ask you, Mr. Thorold, to put this thing straight. You can have no real object in playing with me.'

The other absently hummed a snatch of a song while his eyes became thoughtful. 'Mr. Man,' he said at last, 'you're beginning to have glimmerings that you've been monkeying with bad medicine. You can't say I didn't warn you. You're in one dickens of a mess and you come whining to me to get you out of it.'

'Not such a mess,' retorted Wilde mildly. 'I'll get there sooner or later. But I'm looking for a short cut, and it may be that you can point it out to me. Will you?'

'If I was a vindictive man,' declared Thorold, 'I'd say I'd see you burn before I'd lift a finger to get you out of trouble. I *am* a vindictive man. You've got me here, and here I suppose I'll stay for a while. You carry on, son. I'm quite comfortable.'

The strain of many days of unrelenting physical and mental effort was telling on the detective. 'If you take it like that, I've got no more to say,' he declared, pressing the bell-push to summon the gaoler. 'I've apologized. You can take any complaint

you've got against me to the Commissioner or to the Home Secretary or whom you please. I can do no more except to tell you that I don't propose to hold you any longer. You're free, Mr. Thorold. And now let me say' — he spoke with a passion strange in a man usually so self-restrained — 'that I'll damn well get to the bottom of this without any help from you.' The door swung open. 'You can go.'

For once he had succeeded in astonishing the millionaire, who stood with a smile frozen on his lips regarding the other like some strange animal. 'Tut, tut, Wilde,' he said. 'Pull yourself together, man. I didn't think you had that amount of red blood in you. Do I understand that you are letting me go — without conditions?'

'Without conditions,' repeated Wilde. 'Go.'

The millionaire passed through the doorway. Outside he paused for an instant. 'There are some elements of sportsmanship about you, Wilde. You'll hear from me again.'

CHAPTER XXVI

AT THE REGAL HOTEL

DURING the day a special messenger brought an envelope to Scotland Yard. This, which was addressed to Wilde, contained a sheet of paper neatly typed in the form of an invitation card:

At home four p.m.

Miss Patricia Langton.
The Regal Hotel.

Mr. Wilde and friends.

Winter, loitering in the chief inspector's room when the message arrived, fingered the paper with curiosity when the other tossed it over to him. 'What's this lady typewriter who lives at Balham giving an at home at the Regal Hotel for?' he demanded.

Wilde withdrew the cartridges from a revolver and squinted through the weapon before slowly replacing them one by one. 'Social ambition, perhaps,' he ventured. 'Wish to goodness I was what they call in the Wild West stories quick on the draw. This gun's an infernal nuisance, but I don't like to

be without it just now. She says "and friends." I'm taking six. There are four more I've had plastered about the hotel for the last hour or two. That makes ten. It should be enough. Will you come, sir?'

The chief constable shook his head. 'Thank you all the same, but I'll have my cup of tea here. I'm getting too old for the kind of tea-party to which one takes pistols. But I'll certainly be around here waiting to grab a telephone.'

Wilde pushed the weapon back into his pocket and looked sideways at his chief. 'You don't seem very curious about it,' he said.

'What I don't know can't hurt me,' observed Winter, dropping a heavy hand on the other's shoulder. 'You've sweated on this case and I'm not going to jump in at the last moment. You've got to hold the baby. If things go wrong, you'll probably get the kicks and you might as well have the glory if there is any. Good luck. But be careful.'

At half-past three that afternoon a tradesman's covered van drew up at a back entrance of the Regal Hotel. A tall, gaunt man emerged from its depths, and, shouldering a crate of mineral waters, disappeared within the hotel. In the storeroom where he deposited his burden, no less a person than the manager was waiting.

'I got your message, you see, Mr. Wilde,' he said. 'Always happy to do what we can to assist gentle-

men of your profession. Your bag has arrived, and I have a quiet room where you can change.'

'Very good of you, I'm sure,' murmured the detective, mopping his brow. 'I have an idea that, if I had come in at the front entrance, I might have been noticed, and that would have spoiled a little scheme of mine. Some of my men are about?'

'Oh, yes. We've enlisted them temporarily among the staff as commissionnaires, porters, waiters, and barmen, besides one or two who appear as guests.' The manager hesitated, and went on. 'Of course, I've no notion why you've asked us to help you in this way, except that it's apparent you believe some big criminals to be in the hotel. But I hope — that is, we are anxious that you will do your best to prevent any undesirable notoriety focussing on us.'

'Thank you,' said Wilde. 'We'll keep the hotel out of it if it is at all possible.'

There were a few matters to be attended to, but punctually at the hour named in the invitation, Wilde, scrupulously clad in morning dress, was bowing to Miss Langton. He was surprised to find her alone in a private sitting-room on the first floor. She received him with smiling formality.

'So glad you've come. Are you all alone? I will ring for tea.' No one would have supposed that less than twenty-four hours before she had enforced her will on him at the point of a pistol.

He grinned as he took his seat. 'I did not know

this was to be *tête-à-tête*. Your invitation suggested a larger party.'

'Oh, I expect some other people later on,' she explained. 'I thought it would be nice if we had a little chat together first. Last night our conversation was rather strained. Oh, here is the tea. Do you take sugar? One lump or two?' She poised the sugar tongs.

'One, please.' He balanced the cup and saucer while his eyes followed the waiter to the door, and roved to a second door that apparently led to a communicating apartment.

'Mr. Thorold and some others will be here shortly,' she chattered on. 'Terrible thing about his house, wasn't it? And those two poor people burnt to death. I used to think I should fall in love with Watkins. The newspapers are making a lot of fuss about incendiarism and murder. Do you think it was as bad as that, Mr. Wilde?'

Thoughtfully he bit a small iced cake in half. 'The newspapers will say anything, Miss Langton. Luckily they did not know that I had Mr. Thorold under detention for suspected murder when the fire broke out. What a gaudy touch that would have given to the story!'

She spluttered with laughter. 'We're doing a lot of polite side-stepping. Let's get to business. What have you discovered that made you determine to release Mr. Thorold? I'm sure that you had no such intention when we parted last night.'

Wilde finished the remainder of the iced cake. 'Why did you tell me you would be home at four o'clock and induce me to look like a lost bridegroom in this tail-coat when all you intended to give me was a cup of tea?'

'You forget,' she retorted. 'I have been on parole. This I felt would be a pleasanter place for explanations than Scotland Yard. And if you want it straight from the shoulder, Mr. Wilde, here you are. Now that you have got rid of your obsession that Mr. Thorold is the Black Ace, have you any idea who is?'

He glanced at her over his raised cup. 'Did I say that I'd got over that obsession? I don't know. Perhaps we have come to think a little along similar lines. All the same,' he added gravely, 'I suspect that the pair of you propose to put some plant over on me.' He raised his voice slightly. 'Why don't you come in, Mr. Thorold? Your tea is getting cold.'

The inner door swung and the tall figure of the millionaire appeared framed in the opening. He bowed to Miss Langton and carefully closed the door behind him. 'Here we are again, Wilde,' he announced. 'How did you know I was there?'

The detective brushed a few crumbs from his knee with a handkerchief. 'Oh, I didn't know,' he admitted. 'I heard that you were about the hotel, and I couldn't understand why Miss Langton should

need two rooms for her little party. So I surmised you were waiting within reach.'

'Give me a cup of tea, Pat,' said Thorold. 'You're quite human this afternoon,' he added to the other man. 'You should have heard him this morning, Pat, when he turned me loose. I thought he was going to bite me.'

The woman wagged a threatening finger. 'That's enough, Quenton. I'm not going to have you disturb the harmony of this gathering. Mr. Wilde and I have buried the hatchet.'

'All right,' agreed Thorold. 'I take back all I've said, Wilde. I'm here to prove it. I'm here — with the help of Miss Langton — to heap coals of fire on that shaggy head. Can't say more than that. You don't expect me to kiss him?'

'You see' — she spread her hands wide to the detective — 'he will behave like a natural-born idiot.'

'Please, lady, don't expose me,' pleaded the millionaire. 'You're a bold man, Wilde, to come here alone to confront two such desperate characters.'

'Mr. Wilde,' interposed Miss Langton, with a meaning smile, 'was invited to bring friends. I haven't had the privilege of entertaining them, but I've no doubt that they are near at hand.'

'I didn't wish to abuse your hospitality,' said Wilde, 'but, in fact, I did ask a few people to be about.'

'Then we're all set,' observed Thorold.

'All except the villain of the piece,' remarked Wilde.

The millionaire put down his cup. Crossing to the inner door, he threw it open.

'Oh, Watkins, here's a gentleman wishes to have a word with you.'

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CAPTURE OF THE BLACK ACE

'No need to introduce you,' said Thorold, edging a little behind the newcomer and waving a hand toward the detective. 'You've met Mr. Wilde before.'

The butler bowed stiffly and, standing with one hand on his hip, glanced a little uncertainly from one to the other. His face was pasty white.

Wilde was on his feet. 'Not altogether an unexpected pleasure,' he said. 'Excuse me. Stand still a moment.'

Swiftly and expertly he passed his hands over the other and dropped back to his seat with a nod of satisfaction. 'A mere formality,' he explained. 'I just wanted to be sure. So you're not dead, Watkins. I had an idea that some sympathy was being wasted on you.'

Watkins smiled wryly. 'That fire was a mistake,' he said slowly. 'Still, I'm glad you haven't dropped any tears on my account.'

'Watkins,' went on the detective, 'I arrest you for murder. If you want to say anything, I'm not going to stop you, but don't forget it may be used in evidence.'

The Black Ace moistened his lips. 'I'm not

afraid, Mr. Wilde. What I've done I've done at the dictates of my conscience, even though it's been against the formulas of the law. I'm not ashamed of anything and I'll tell you what you want so far as I myself am concerned. But I won't drag any one else in.'

'Now we understand one another,' said Wilde curtly.

The prisoner rested his elbow on a table and his chin on his hand, gazing straight in front of him. 'What I want to make clear,' he said, speaking in a dull monotone, 'is that I've acted entirely unselfishly all through. I may be only a servant, but I've thought and studied deeply about certain things. Law is a word, justice is a thing. I suppose I've read practically every book on criminology as well as hundreds on social subjects, and I've not found one person in a million who has realized that the present basis of society is wrong. You punish the weaklings and the unfortunate and leave those who are the fundamental cause of crime untouched. Long ago I came to the conclusion that an able man backed with money could teach the lawgivers and the administrators of the law a lesson. I had it all thought out — and I only needed the money to start. My chance came when Mr. Thorold engaged me. He is extraordinarily careless in some of his personal affairs, and before I had been with him long he trusted me implicitly. The unthinking world

may say that I betrayed that trust. I don't look at it that way. He had more money than he could ever spend and I took what I wanted for the good of the community.'

'In other words, Watkins had a talent for forgery which he exercised at my expense,' explained the millionaire. 'I believe that you were worried about some of my banking operations, Wilde.'

The detective was casually jotting notes on the back of an envelope. He looked up and nodded. 'That was among the points which I had against you. There was in particular twenty thousand pounds drawn out of your bank at about the time young Estrehan first got into trouble and some bonds were returned to his employers. At the time I learnt that, it never occurred to me to think of forgery.'

A gleam of dour amusement appeared on Watkins's face. 'Why should you?' he asked. 'The only person who could open up that line of suspicion was Mr. Thorold himself. When I realized that I had practically unlimited capital to draw upon with comparative safety, I began to arrange an organization to carry out my plans. I knew that it would be necessary for me to enlist the help of certain professional criminals. So in my spare time I became a spectator at the Old Bailey and some of the police courts. I managed to scrape acquaintance with one or two people and through them with others. Thus

I was able to select those who would be most useful for my purposes and I gained a knowledge of some things that were going on in the underworld. You needn't trouble to make a note of this, Mr. Wilde. I'm not giving you any names.'

The chief inspector's face betrayed incredulity. 'You're not going to tell us that you enlisted a bunch of crooks in this casual manner. It's a mathematical certainty that you'd have been given away deliberately or inadvertently before you got started.'

A patronizing quality as of one explaining to a child came into Watkins's voice as he answered.

'I didn't suppose that you held me quite as simple as that. I took precautions. I knew that it was important to avoid my personal identity becoming known. I have a faculty for make-up and the man who bought a couple of drinks for A and learned something about B at an East End public house had little resemblance to the man who dined at a West End restaurant with B. There was nothing elaborate really — no wigs or false moustaches or anything like that. Just a touch of dye to the hair, a little stain to alter the complexion, a different set of false teeth, an alteration in walk, a touch of padding, changes of dress — oh, there are a hundred simple ways of doing these things, as you know. And bear in mind that none of these people had any reason to suppose I might be in disguise. None of them had seen me in my proper person as Watkins the

butler. They had no basis of comparison — nothing to look for.

‘Then, again, I did not approach them quite so crudely as you seem to imagine. There is not one, even now, who can tell you who the Black Ace is. I bound them to me by motives of self-interest. They were highly paid, and in some cases I knew enough against them to make any attempt at double-crossing highly unprofitable.’

‘That was, I believe, one of the methods of the late lamented Jonathan Wilde,’ interjected Thorold.

The butler frowned. ‘He was a bloodthirsty scoundrel; I am not,’ he declared with dignity. ‘But I had to have discipline. These men had to learn that I had power to carry out either my threats or my promises — that I could both punish and protect. So I snatched one from the jaws of prison — but you know about that.’

‘Another step that I took beforehand was to rent a few places which could be used in emergency. You see’ — there was a touch of pride in his tone — ‘I took a hint from the methods of successful generals and considered the means of retreat before I began my attack. I thought of everything.’

‘But you had your work to do at Mr. Thorold’s,’ said the detective. ‘I don’t quite see ——’

‘I wasn’t an arduous taskmaster,’ observed Thorold. ‘And I was out a great deal. Watkins

would have quite an amount of time for — for his own affairs.'

'No, there was no great difficulty about it,' went on the butler. 'I could arrange things. As I was saying, I thought of everything. For instance, while getting things into shape it had entered my mind that my motives might be misconstrued and that I might be considered a commonplace criminal actuated by pure greed unless I adopted some distinctive means of showing the author of those episodes in which I was concerned. I chose a black ace as my trademark. Also, if I may say so, there was a little question of personal pride. I wanted to pit my wits against Scotland Yard and I wanted them to think of me as an individual. That was why I sent a card to Chief Constable Winter, knowing that he would remember it later.'

'I had heard of a notorious receiver at Dalston whom the police had never brought to book and my first action was directed against him. There is no harm in mentioning the man Paddy, since he has been convicted — although I hope you will never get hold of him to serve a sentence. He was willing enough to undertake the executive work, and I agreed to take the stones from him at a price far beyond what he could hope to get from an ordinary receiver. We planned the thing together. The alibi which I arranged would have been impregnable but for one thing. I went myself to Liverpool. Now I

could have forged his signature in the hotel book and you would never have been able to prove that he had not done it himself if I had had time. You must have time to imitate a signature and the pains I should have taken would have seemed queer. Therefore, I hit on the plan of an injured hand. Mind you, Paddy was a fool to have smoked those distinctive cigarettes — but I'll admit the real failure to cover his traces was mine.'

'Almost entirely yours,' said Wilde. 'Paddy was suspected from the first. If you hadn't got him to follow me from Clarges Street that day we burst up the fake export agency, we might have dropped that end. But that made certain that he was mixed up with the Black Ace.'

'A foolish mistake,' agreed Watkins. 'The affair at Farringdon Street had taken me by surprise. I was anxious to learn something more about your next moves and I acted hastily.'

'Tell us how you got on to Estrehan,' said the detective. 'Why did you want a raw young sucker like that in the game, anyway?'

'That was partly chance, but I had very good reasons,' continued the prisoner. 'I had to have a few professional crooks because of their technical experience in some branches of crime. The obvious disadvantage was that the police would have an acquaintance with their methods. Young Estrehan was in a hole. I was having dinner one evening

when he and a girl I recognized as associating with a gang I was keeping my eye on seated themselves at a table near me. I was practically hidden by a pillar, and I heard enough of their conversation to tell me what had happened in his case. He struck me as a type that I needed at the place in Farringdon Street — a bit of a fool who could take messages for me and whom I could mould exactly as I chose. He would not dare to betray any of the little it would be necessary for him to know while he was in fear for himself. I played also on his infatuation for Stella Cliffe. Perhaps you won't believe me when I say I was really sorry for him.'

He looked from one to the other challengingly and, as they made no comment, he went on:

'I took steps to put Estrehan straight with his employers and I determined that Velvet Grimshaw was too dangerous a rogue to be allowed to continue to infest the world. With a little trouble I learnt something of his habits. I waited for him at the Gnomes Club and at the first opportunity I shot him down with no more compunction than in killing a snake. I had not counted on you being there that night, Mr. Wilde ——'

'I was looking for Stella Cliffe,' explained the detective.

'That might have disarranged my plans,' declared Watkins, 'but I found I was able to block your moves in a way that gave me confidence that I

could meet future emergencies. Of course details such as the switching off of the lights had been arranged beforehand. The torch I used was one of a kind manufactured by thousands, and I held it in my handkerchief before I threw it away in case of finger-prints.'

'We know that you had a woman assisting you,' interjected Wilde. 'Did she put the lights out or was that done by some other accomplice?'

The butler's eyes rested listlessly on him for an instant. 'A point you must decide for yourself,' he said. 'You may save yourself the trouble of laying that sort of trap for me. I'm willing to take my own medicine, but I don't propose to get any one else into trouble.'

'Very well,' said the other indifferently. 'How did you manage to make your getaway?'

A thin smile flickered on Watkins's face, leaving him as grave as ever. 'Do you remember sending a waiter to have the doors barred. I was that waiter.'

Thorold made no attempt to repress a chuckle, and Wilde, after an instant's hesitation, threw back his head and laughed. 'It was then you picked my pocket of my card-case and passed it on to your lady friend,' he observed.

'I needed one of your cards,' said the butler mildly, 'and, although I am not very expert, your concentration on other matters gave me my opportunity. I may say it was part of the original plan

to get Stella Cliffe away. Her association with Estrehan was bound to lead to enquiry. Besides, I had conceived that we might on some future occasion need a girl of her quick and unscrupulous wit. For the time it was necessary only to get her away.'

'A small point of personal interest,' interposed Thorold. 'Did you know I was at the club?'

'Not when I went there,' answered Watkins. 'I saw you there. It was when Mr. Wilde called on you the following day that I got some notion of what had happened. I took the liberty of listening at the door for a while. It seemed to me a suitable time to administer a warning to the three of you and I delivered a black ace addressed to each of you while you were still in conference — do you remember?'

'A man of your resource should have known better than to use the envelopes that were in the house,' said Wilde, shaking his head. 'It might have led directly to you.'

'There were no others immediately available. As it happened, it turned out to my advantage. It confirmed you in the suspicion that Mr. Thorold was mixed up in the business. From without I heard you ask permission to write a note. I was a little disconcerted, for I realized that you intended to inspect the stationery. A moment's thought, however, showed me that you would jump to conclusions against Mr. Thorold. I resolved that I would encourage that delusion. Mr. Thorold and I are much

of the same build. Generally speaking, you would expect him to make some attempt at disguise, so our difference in feature did not much matter. When I met you in Farringdon Street, I was masked and I deliberately used a slight American accent to mislead you. I adopted the same course at other times so that your suspicions might be focussed on him.'

'You succeeded,' said Thorold grimly. His eye met Wilde's triumphantly.

'There was no animus,' went on the butler. 'It was the line of least resistance. Mr. Wilde was bound to suspect some one else at Clarges Street unless some such precaution was taken.'

'I am obliged,' said the millionaire with a little bow. 'Go on.'

'There's little more to say. You know what I did to Markwell and Murraystein. I had some other people of that kind to deal with, but events got out of hand. It became apparent to me that my real danger was as much from another quarter as from Scotland Yard. I learned of the activities of Miss Langton and Mr. Thorold after a while, and at first I was inclined to pooh-pooh them as futile amateurs. It came to me as a shock when I realized that they were getting unpleasantly near the truth, but even then I never supposed that they had penetrated my identity. I was able to keep some sort of eye on Mr. Thorold and on one occasion I inspected Miss Langton's office.'

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Wilde,' said Patricia, catching the sidelong glance that the detective threw at her. 'I gave you credit for that.'

'I don't want even Chief Detective Inspector Wilde to be blamed for any action of mine,' said the prisoner. 'There is no need for me to hide or to deny any of my personal actions. The only reason I have for gratifying your curiosity is that other people should not suffer for what I have done. It was I who attempted to kill Stella Cliffe. She was too astute a person to have enlisted as a witness against me.'

'Did you intend that she and Estrehan should die at the house in Canonbury where we found them trussed up?' demanded Wilde.

'Oh, no. My intention was to scare them enough to make them amenable to my directions,' answered the prisoner. 'Their prolonged sojourn in the cellar was due to your activities. When we began to believe that the house was being reconnoitred by your men, we had to clear out. It was impossible to take them with us and equally out of the question to turn them loose. In case we were mistaken and you did not raid the place, I arranged a pistol at the cellar door. If that had not gone off by a certain time, we should have returned to release them. Naturally there was a risk to them; but even if they had died, it would have been one of the chances of war.'

The detective bent unbelieving eyes upon him. 'You didn't want them to die and yet you set a murder trap for the man who should open the door. It was only a chance that saved him.'

The other shook his head in contemptuous denial. 'Nothing of the kind. I had no blank cartridges, but, if you had examined the alignment of that weapon, you would have seen that a bullet fired from it must have passed at least a foot above the head of any one opening the door. It was merely an alarm.'

'The pistol was one which had belonged to Mr. Thorold.'

'Yes. It was one that I had found in his rooms.'

'You said just now that you were trying to encourage my — er — fallacy about Mr. Thorold. Yet directly I had him in custody, you went out of your way to exonerate him. This note that you left for me last night ——'

Again the butler sneered. 'You are trying to score a point like an Old Bailey counsel. True, I was willing to divert suspicion from myself, but I was not at all keen to see Mr. Thorold hanged. I had not supposed that anything could be built up against him that would put him in real danger. When I saw you were in earnest, I determined to head you off. I believed I could do so without exposing myself to any danger. I had in mind an idea which would have stopped all further investigation so far as I was concerned.'

Wilde fiddled with the bottom button of his waistcoat. 'You mean the fire. If I had had a fire to cover my traces, I shouldn't have left obvious indications of arson. You overplayed your hand. Until this morning it had not entered into my mind to identify you as the Black Ace. But when those bones were proved to be old anatomical specimens, I began to think. And, although I am still in the dark as to how Miss Langton and Mr. Thorold got onto you, I think the result would have been much about the same. Please don't think I am not grateful for a short cut.' He bowed to Thorold and Miss Langton.

Watkins had stuck one thumb in his waistcoat pocket, and for the first time during the interview he fixed his gaze full on the detective. 'We all make mistakes — even Scotland Yard men,' he said, with irony. His face clouded and he went on in a dull monotone as though talking to himself. 'This is the end of the road. I've had my run. But I regret nothing. The world is the better for the examples that I have made. I've made blunders — I can see that now. Had I been more careful — had I had a little longer — I might have done more. Don't forget, Wilde, that I solemnly declare my entire responsibility for everything done by the Black Ace. No one else is to be blamed. Mr. Thorold, you have behaved like a gentleman and a sportsman. Thank you. Good-bye.'

His hand flashed to his lips and Wilde sprang toward him with an exclamation. A small bottle tinkled to the floor as he caught the other's arm. A faint odour filled the apartment. The butler slithered slowly out of his chair, a fixed grin in which there was something of a grim triumph on his face. Then there was a choking gurgle and the Black Ace lay still.

Thorold and the detective bent over the body.

'Prussic acid,' said Wilde, sniffing the air. 'But I searched him! I was afraid of something like this. Please ring for a doctor, Miss Langton.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

QUENTON THOROLD EXPLAINS

THERE was nothing that a doctor could do. Prussic acid kills as surely and as swiftly as a rifle bullet.

As speedily as possible the chief inspector had given appropriate instructions to meet the situation. Within half an hour the dead body of the butler, that grim smile still on his face, had been removed.

Neither Miss Langton nor Thorold had left the hotel. Wilde had hinted that he wished them to remain and his request jumped with their inclinations. He came to them after a while with a sober face.

'I make no complaints, Mr. Thorold,' he said, as he dropped into a chair, 'but I would have you remember that my first action, when that man came into the room, was to search him. There was no poison on him then. It is a serious thing for a police officer when a prisoner in his custody commits suicide.'

The millionaire met his gaze steadily. 'No,' he agreed. 'I had searched him myself before you arrived. I took that bottle from him. During our interview I was seated close to him. He picked your pocket once — evidently he played a similar trick on me.'

There was dead silence for a matter of seconds

while Wilde continued his grave scrutiny of the other's face. Presently he made a gesture as though putting the subject aside. 'After all, I can prove nothing and I'm not sure I would if I could. The man's dead.'

'The man's dead,' repeated Thorold. 'He's saved himself some trouble and defrauded the criminal bar out of some fees. There's an end of that. Will you have a drink, Wilde? I could do with one. It's been rather a trying episode.'

Miss Langton, lying back in her chair, her hands clasped behind her head, roused herself from a train of thought. 'I believe you would meet the end of the world with a lift of the eyebrows, Quenton, and ask the archangel Gabriel to have a drink.'

The millionaire pressed a bell-push. 'Perhaps I would, Pat. That poor mad devil's gone, and I won't deny that I'm glad he's been spared the drawn-out formality of a trial. In his heart of hearts, Wilde feels the same thing. It's only his professional feelings that are piqued.'

Wilde's lean face showed the semblance of a grin. When a waiter had taken and returned with the orders, he sipped at a whiskey-and-soda gratefully. An abstemious man as a rule, he felt that this was an occasion for a little stimulant. 'You'll be having something more to say, Mr. Thorold,' he suggested.

The millionaire drained his glass.

'In this little job, Wilde, Pat and I really started

with a pull over you. We knew I wasn't the Black Ace. You didn't. I'm a slow starter, but Pat — well, when she gets going she's a world-beater. Of course, you were all wrong about me from the start. Instead of being a subtle Machiavellian sort of bird I'm just a simple-minded dub. You met me after a murder had been committed and I had a lethal weapon in my possession. In my impulsive innocence I jumped in and offered to help Scotland Yard. No wonder you distrusted me — but no matter. Your suspicions were confirmed when on your first visit to my house you were presented with an ace of clubs enclosed in an envelope similar to those I used. In your place I should have believed what you did.

'Those three black aces certainly staggered me at that time. It was after you had gone that Pat suggested that they must have come from some one in the house. I found it difficult to suspect the perfect Watkins and his wife, but they were the only reasonable supposition. We decided to wait and see. It was a delicate position. I couldn't very well ask my butler whether he had committed murder, could I?'

Wilde rubbed at one of the wrinkles in his cheek with a thick forefinger. 'You'd have saved a whole heap of trouble for all of us if you had dropped me a hint,' he remarked.

'I expected that reproach,' agreed the millionaire. 'We were anxious to have a little more in hand for you. Call it an error of judgment. We kept an eye

on Mr. and Mrs. Watkins and made a few discreet enquiries. They were careful, but we did get one point. Both of them had been out on the night of the murder and no other of the servants had any knowledge of the hour at which they had returned.'

'When I traced Stella,' interposed Miss Langton, 'I got a little farther. From my talk with her, it seemed quite possible that Mrs. Watkins was the woman who had spirited her away.'

'That story of how you got the girl was straight, then,' said the detective sharply. 'I wish you'd said something about the Watkins woman.'

'Don't blame Pat,' said Thorold. 'I told her there could be no harm in probing a bit farther before we let you know our guess. For it was only a guess at the time. We had nothing solid against Mr. and Mrs. Watkins. Besides, I was anxious to make good my promise and get Estrehan for you. The day Stella Cliffe was first taken to Scotland Yard I found the joint in Farringdon Street. I made up my mind then to tell you everything. I planned to spring Watkins on you.'

'I'm a temperamental man, Wilde, and when you burst in on me that day, you jarred me. You began by refusing a drink. That showed you were in a warped frame of mind. I was pained — hurt at a tender point. Nevertheless, I offered my news to you so far as it had to do with Estrehan. You bluntly told me it was stale. Then to my amazement you

were hinting that I was the Black Ace, that you had suspected it all along, and that you had been trying to trick me.'

'One word from you would have cleared that up.'

'Yes.' The millionaire's eyes narrowed. 'I was to say, "Please, sir, it wasn't me; it was Hector Watkins," and Chief Detective Inspector Wilde would have patted me on the back and told me to run away and eat my bun. I saw you had been playing with me and I determined that I would play a little game myself. I didn't see that it was up to me to help you out of the hole you were digging for yourself. So I just let you carry on after giving you fair warning that I was not the Black Ace.'

There was a deeper tinge of colour in Wilde's face. 'You're pretty hard on me,' he protested. 'I had my job to do and things looked black. Perhaps I wasn't very tactful. You must remember that I honestly thought that you were the Black Ace and that you had manhandled me a little before that interview. That wasn't calculated to make me pick and choose my words to you.'

Thorold returned now to his old nonchalant, easy tone. 'Oh, I'm not kicking. I'm just explaining the reason for my attitude. I adopted your rules. You didn't trust me and I wasn't going to confide in you. I had a word with Pat and she agreed with me that we should go ahead, clean up, and tell you when we

got good and ready — not before. Our trump card was Watkins, but we had another ace in our hands in Stella. We — or rather Pat — kept in close touch with her. We felt that sooner or later the Black Ace would try to make some use of her. In any event, Estrehan was likely to attempt some communication.'

Wilde nodded. 'I anticipated that myself.'

'Yes. That was why you had her watched. Probably there would have been earlier developments if you hadn't. And, talking about shadowing, that retinue you tacked on to me was confoundedly embarrassing at times. I couldn't always keep an eye on Watkins's outside movements. Then he himself got some notion that I was camping on his trail. I tell you it wasn't so easy. One thing I did do. I kept a little diary of his absences and those of his wife from the house. I jotted it down in Greek because I felt that Watkins might be keeping tab of me as closely as I was of him and I didn't think his education extended so far as the dead languages. Now, whenever any little incident in which the Black Ace was concerned broke out, Watkins was away from the house.'

'I'll make you a present of this,' observed the detective. 'I instructed my men to be very careful with your servants. We had picked up their records, of course, and they were all clean. Both Watkins and his wife seemed utterly beyond suspicion. After

our early enquiries it seemed a waste of time to worry about them.'

'As a matter of fact,' pursued Thorold, 'I was a little afraid you might stumble across something through watching them and burst up our little scheme. I couldn't understand why you didn't. There was a time when I almost got an attack of the staggers. So far as circumstantial evidence went, it was clear that you had more against Pat and me than we had against Watkins.'

'Among other things,' interposed Miss Langton, 'we had got possession of the Ogle jewels.'

Wilde straightened in his chair. 'What!' he exclaimed.

Thorold nodded. 'That surprises you, does it? The position was this: Watkins, having got the jewels from Paddy, either did not know where to dispose of them or was afraid to take any action for a while. I found them hidden behind a tier of books in my study. I handed them over to Pat to hold.'

'Where are they now?' demanded the detective.

'In a vault of the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit,' answered Miss Langton. 'They were dangerous things to be found in the keeping of either of us. So I put them in the safe deposit and sent the keys in a sealed package to a cousin of mine to look after for me.'

'You were right,' commented Wilde, his eyes twinkling. 'If I had found either of you with those

jewels, I should have needed a lot of convincing.'

'Then you turned up with the announcement that the Black Ace had got hold of Stella. That left us flabbergasted for the instant. But, although we had lost the girl, we still had Watkins. Through him we got on to the house in Canonbury almost as quickly as Scotland Yard — though far be it from me to disparage the very smart piece of work you pulled off.'

'The devil you did!' observed Wilde.

'I know what you are thinking,' said the other, shaking his head whimsically. 'There are more ways of killing a cat than choking it with cream. If neither Pat nor I could shadow Watkins without betraying ourselves to you, there were other means at our disposal. Pat has a highly efficient staff at her typing office. There is one intelligent young lady — a Miss Brann, whom I will introduce to you one day — who stands about five feet nothing and looks as simple as a child. If Watkins saw her, he never realized what she was doing. She served us on occasion to tell of Watkins's movements and she found this joint for us. Before we could form any plans on her information, you had got in front of us. We had a little pow-wow, Pat and I, and we thought up something else. The question was, Would you give us time? As we more than half-expected, you didn't. You put me under arrest. We intended that the little scene we have just had should be staged at Clarges Street last night. This hotel was selected as

an alternative rendezvous in case I should be unable to play my part.'

Miss Langton broke in: 'You see, Mr. Wilde, the contingency happened. With Quenton out of the way, it would have been awkward for many reasons for me to face Watkins in that house alone. So late last night, after my talk with you, I sent a little note to him in disguised handwriting. I enclosed a black ace. This is a copy of the note.'

She produced a sheet of paper from her handbag and passed it to Wilde, who read:

Unless you wish all the information in our possession to be made public, you will call and see us at Room 213, Regal Hotel, at two-thirty to-morrow. You will come prepared to pay for silence. — *Those who Know.*

'Why,' asked the detective, looking from one to the other, 'this suggestion of blackmail?'

Miss Langton smoothed her dress. 'A psychological touch,' she explained. 'It was intended to leave Watkins in some uncertainty as to the senders of the message. If he had a notion that it came, perhaps, from some of his own gang whom he could bribe or menace to secrecy, he was more likely to obey than on a summons signed by Mr. Thorold or myself. And the mere fact that he did obey would be an admission.'

'It also explains the sudden burning of the house,' declared Wilde. 'With the possibility of imminent

exposure, it would be helpful to him if it was supposed that he and his wife had been burnt to death.'

'That may have been in his mind,' said Thorold. 'I happen to know that he was almost entirely unsuspecting of Miss Langton as the writer because he told me so. He supposed me to be still in custody, and I think it shook him a little when I was the first person he met at the entrance hall. I grabbed him by the wrist and he dared not risk a scene. So I got him to accompany me to this suite, where I, with the help of Miss Langton, searched him and took this thing from him.' He tapped the pistol on the table. 'Then he accepted my conditions and gave us the outlines of the story that you afterwards heard him tell.'

'This is the first we have heard of conditions,' said Wilde. 'But don't get alarmed; I'm not going to ask what sort of bargain you made with him.' Then, looking at his watch, he added, 'Well, I must see Mrs. Watkins. I had her arrested half an hour ago. Suppose you two come and see me at Scotland Yard to-morrow at about this time.'

'You've got the woman!' cried Miss Langton.

The corners of Wilde's mouth wrinkled. 'Why not?' he asked, and slid out of the door.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHAT MARTIN WILDE KNEW

THERE are moments in a criminal investigation when the smothering baffling fog of conjecture and guesswork is suddenly dissipated and the roads to a given end are revealed with comparative clearness. With the unmasking of Watkins, Wilde was able to cut away from all the extraneous avenues into which the search had led and concentrate on a definite line. This was the sort of thing which the organization of the Criminal Investigation Department could take, so to speak, at the gallop.

Yet, as he sat with legs outstretched in the leather chair by Winter's desk, he felt like a schoolboy before his master as he expounded the events which had brought about the climax. With a detached honesty of mind he made no attempt to palliate the processes of mind that had so nearly led him astray.

'Well, anyway, you've got through,' said the Chief Constable. 'We can't expect to be infallible like those blokes they put in books. Still, it might have been a knock in the eye for the service if things had not fallen out as they have. I always had a feeling that you were wrong to monkey with Thorold. No wonder he was a little hot under the collar.'

'Your instinct was right, sir,' admitted Wilde.

'You certainly warned me. I'm afraid I had the bit between my teeth.'

Winter moved to his desk and, helping himself to a cigar, examined it closely before applying a light. 'It happens to the best of us,' he observed. 'Forget it. We're right with the public now and you'll be a little tin hero instead of a whipping boy. We'll have to handle this inquest on Watkins pretty carefully, though. No need to say more than you've got to, Wilde, eh?'

'I shall tell the exact and literal truth,' said the chief inspector, meeting his superior's glance steadily. 'What I suspect — what I'm morally certain of — is not evidence. For between you and me, sir, there is no question that Thorold gave that man a chance to commit suicide.'

There was a tap at the door and a clerk entered carrying a card. Wilde, rising, tapped out his pipe on the fender. 'It's our friends, sir. Would you like see them here?'

Winter thought for a moment. 'Might be as well,' he said. 'Perhaps I can help to smooth 'em down. Let's give 'em a cup of tea.'

It was with the air of a man greeting a couple of long-absent intimate friends that he greeted Miss Langton and Thorold.

'This is sporting of you after the way we've treated you. Wilde and I have just been talking things over. We're in your debt in more than one

way. Won't you sit down? I've rung for some tea.'

Wilde, less effusive if equally genial, placed chairs. Thorold's right eyelid trembled in a confidential wink as he took his seat. 'A day or two ago you wouldn't have bet that Pat and I would be here now as your willing and honoured guests.'

When the clerk who brought the tea-tray had departed, the millionaire turned abruptly to Wilde. 'Now, my lad,' he said briskly, 'it's your deal. Pour us some tea, Pat, and let's hear Mr. Wilde. You've got it all straightened out by now, I guess. That's where we amateurs fail. We got onto the Black Ace, but we couldn't tuck in the ends of the job neatly. What have you done about Mrs. Watkins?'

The chief inspector took a quick gulp of tea. 'I think it's plain sailing now,' he said, 'but I'm afraid I can't claim any particular brilliance in handling the case. You people were on the inside track practically all along. I was wrong — but it was only after I had gathered you in, Mr. Thorold, that it began to appear to me that I might be off the trail. There had been certain things that did not fit in and it was to get over them that I adopted the hypothesis of a second Black Ace.'

'That was something near the truth!' exclaimed Miss Langton.

'It is the things which are near the truth but are not the truth that bring about trouble,' said Wilde.

‘Really, I first got a glimpse of the light yesterday morning when I reached Clarges Street. If Watkins had been content to burn the house down without any other elaboration, I should probably have come to the conclusion that it was part of a plan by your friends to destroy any chance of picking up evidence against you. But when I learned that the charred bones were those of anatomical specimens, and that Mr. and Mrs. Watkins had vanished, I remembered a lot of things. Here was a man not unlike you in general build, who was living in your house, and was — so far as I knew — implicitly trusted. He might have been your accomplice, but that theory did not seem to me quite to fit. Why should he seek to make it appear that he was dead? When I questioned the other servants, it began to seem more likely than ever that he was the real Simon Pure. I found that he had had extraordinary freedom in his comings and goings, and it was apparent that he had been absent from the house at vital times in the case. Also he had been heard to give expression to queer views which fitted with those I had myself heard the Black Ace express. Combined with the attempt on Stella Cliffe, and a warning note that had been delivered at my lodgings by the Black Ace in person — in neither of which events could you have had any hand — I found myself looking at the case from a fresh angle.

‘But if Watkins was the Black Ace and you were entirely innocent, what was your game? That was

not hard to decide after the hints you had given me, and which I now recalled. You were trying to come the amateur detective stunt over me.

‘The first thing was to pick up Watkins. Now it is not so difficult to get on to a *known* person. When we started to look for the Black Ace, we were groping for unknown persons and matters were complicated because of my conviction that you were the man. This was entirely different. Lots of our fellows had seen Watkins, and we had adequate descriptions of him which we could circulate. We found that he and his wife had picked up a taxi in Piccadilly a few minutes before the fire alarm was given. They had driven to King’s Cross Station and there dismissed the cab. From there they picked up another taxi to a small house in a street off the Upper Street, Islington. My men tracked them there and in the way that sometimes happens they tumbled across three of Watkins’s accomplices in the place. Two of them were fellows we had been looking for in another connection for some time — hold-up bandits of no particular brain power, but of a type that sticks at little. Handled by a man of Watkins’s capacity, they were highly dangerous. The third was Paddy the Ghost. Our men were a little less surprised than they were and grabbed ’em before it got to shooting. But the Watkinses had got away before our people reached the house and we could dig nothing out of our prisoners.’

‘Tell me,’ said Thorold, ‘did you know all this before you released me?’

‘Not all. Some,’ answered Wilde. ‘Well, as I say, we fairly lost sight of Watkins and his wife for the time. We, of course, had all the railway stations blocked and had given notice to our men at the ports. But it was at Croydon that we picked up the lady. She was disguised as an old woman and her passport photograph resembled her. Our men at the air station, however, noticed that the Foreign Office stamp looked queer. A little examination showed that the original photograph had been removed, another substituted, and a fake stamp impressed on it. The description had also been tampered with. So the woman was held and in a little she admitted her identity.

‘There remained Watkins himself. He seemed to be entirely lost. I was the more concerned because, in view of your attitude, I wanted to jump in and clean up before you got a chance.’

‘I’m here to say that you almost did it,’ declared Thorold.

Wilde smilingly shook his head. ‘Nearly, but not quite. We were left in the air about Watkins. He might be anywhere. Then I thought of Miss Langton. We had been keeping an incidental eye on her and on you after your release, Mr. Thorold. I had an idea that the pair of you still had something up your sleeves. When I found that Miss Langton had en-

gaged rooms at the Regal, I began to smell a rat. I put some men quietly to watch the hotel and my suspicions were confirmed when I got an invitation from her. "And friends" tacked onto my name looked as if trouble was expected. I myself arrived at the hotel a little early, but Watkins had already arrived. You spoilt my scheme, Mr. Thorold, by getting him the moment that he entered. I had intended to snatch him from under your nose. As it was, I let affairs take your course and you played out the comedy.'

'Comedy — a trade term,' explained Thorold, leaning toward Miss Langton.

The woman smiled. 'I think we may call honours easy, Mr. Wilde. What is going to happen now?'

'We're practically finished. It's up to a judge and jury now,' said Wilde. 'We shall put Mrs. Watkins on trial as an accessory, but the only real things we've got against her are that she spirited Stella away after the murder, and her part in the burning of the house in Clarges Street. She will probably plead that she acted under duress. Paddy will get what's due to him. The other men will be tried for the raid on the Old Bailey and we've got an individual account with each of them. I doubt if they'll worry us again for the next ten or fifteen years.'

'And young Estrehan — what about him?' enquired Miss Langton.

'Look here,' put in the millionaire, 'I want to say a word about this. I'm the one who's out of pocket over this show and I'm entitled to a word. That twenty thousand that went back to this young fellow's employers was really mine. They would have to pay it all back to me if they prosecuted him for embezzlement?'

'Certainly,' agreed Winter. 'It's their loss, however you look at it.'

'And if I don't claim they're not likely to stir in the matter.'

'If you've got any notion of that sort,' said Wilde acidly, 'you'll forgive me for mentioning that it's the quixotic act of a damned fool. You've got no sort of responsibility.'

'It's my money,' retorted the other. 'I shan't miss it and I don't want that poor fish to go to prison. I've got one of those days when I feel like giving something away. I'd be mad enough to give you something, Wilde, if you'd let me.'

'I'll not take advantage of your mood,' said the chief inspector. 'If you want to do anything, there's always the Police Orphanage. Seriously, Mr. Thorold, I take it that you want us to let that young fool off.' He turned to Winter. 'I don't think he's anything but a fool, sir, and I've got no personal animosity for that business in Farringdon Street. He's been let in all round. If you think ——'

The Chief Constable made a sweeping gesture

across this desk. 'If you make a point of it, Mr. Thorold, we'll cut the lad out.'

'You are a pair of delightful men,' declared Miss Langton. 'I put Quenton up to this. You see, I believe that something can be made of him and the girl. Quenton is willing to set them up in Canada and give them a chance.'

Winter and Wilde exchanged amused glances. 'Wish I'd been born a crook,' muttered the latter. 'Anyway, our Dominion friends will get some experience when she's educated Estrehan.'

Thorold patted him familiarly on the back. 'Don't be a cheap cynic, Wilde. You know you're really glad. Now let's get down to business. Do you know of any one who wants to take over a well-established efficient typewriting business? Miss Langton is retiring.' He broke off into a snatch of song:

'So join in a measure expressive of pleasure,
For I'm to be married to-day, to-day,
Yes, I'm to be married to-day —

'Not exactly to-day, but next week. No fuss. Just a quiet registry office business. I want you both to come.'

He thrust out a hand and the chief inspector gripped it. 'Nothing I'd like better,' Wilde grinned. 'And I might run to a pair of silver handcuffs as a wedding present.'

THE END

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HELL'S LOOSE

By Roland Pertwee

WHEN Commander Robert Shaftoe finds a skeleton in a thicket, he discovers also a secret that is to imperil his life and the lives of others and, in the end, to save the lives of thousands. From the tattered pockets of the skeleton Shaftoe draws various papers capable of launching a thunderbolt to destroy one of the greatest of modern industries. The search for the owner leads him to France and to Noelle, daughter of a dead inventor. A sudden revolutionary outbreak paralyzes the nation by the destruction of all gasoline supplies. Hell is loose with a vengeance. There is no hope except in the secret formula, but Shaftoe, who knows it, has been taken prisoner.

Noelle's picturesque journey, Shaftoe's dramatic escape — both these prepare the scene for a climax which holds the reader breathless.

ELEVEN CLUES TO THE IDENTITY OF 'THE BLACK ACE'

COENTON THOROLD: American millionaire, big-game hunter, and war-time Secret Service agent who volunteered in the pursuit of the Black Ace.

STELLA: A girl of the underworld, who acted as the pawn for Velvet Grimshaw in the 20,000-pound bond swindle.

VELVET GRIMSHAW: A confidence man, shot dead in the Gnomes night club and branded with the Ace of Clubs.

PADDY THE GHOST: An elusive pick-pocket, thought to be in the pay of the Black Ace.

MARKWELL: A blackmailer, hanged by the constable on the beat, tarred and feathered and almost lashed to death.

SILAS LONGHORN: An expert in ciphers, who unravelled an important message from the Black Ace.

DICK ESTREHAN: A bank clerk who pretended he was a millionaire's son, and who was madly in love with Stella.

WILDE: Chief Detective Inspector of Scotland Yard, whose first encounter with the Black Ace resulted in a broken chair and a splitting headache.

DUTCHY OGLE: A fence, robbed of 10,000 pounds' worth of precious gems and recipient of an Ace of Clubs.

WATKINS: Thorold's butler, whose hobby was criminology and who knew more about the fire in Clarges Street than he cared to admit.

THE BLACK ACE: An idealistic crook. He punished those who had wriggled clear of the Law and held up the Old Bailey in the sensational trial of Paddy the Ghost.
